

WRITE ON!



Short Story Writing Contest

2023
Contest Winners



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Table of Contents

First Place

Passage by Alec Walker page 4

Second Place

The Crypt by James Reid page 15

Third Place

Letters from Home by Annika Hudson-Laursen page 24

Honorable Mentions

To Live Forever by Mary Kay Smith page 31

Time to Remember by Jane Limprecht page 36

The Man Who Destroyed the World by Ryan Sybertz page 44

Defrost by Zoe Maliszewskyj page 54

One for the Road by David K. Henrickson page 64

She Who Walks with Spirits by Debra Snyder page 73

Sir Arthur and the Dragon by Kieran Paulsenpage 81

It's Like They're Right Here with Us by Matthew Annis page 88

This House is Haunted by Katherine Diemer page 95

Grace Falling by Susan Reese page 104

The Not-Time-Machine by Heidi Vermette page 112

The Starlight Mitra by Nicole Bazemore page 119

First Place: Alec Walker

Leesburg, VA

Passage

"If you could change the past...would you do it?"

You're laughing and she's incandescent, aglow in the sticky haze of summer heat and sugar syrup, leaning forward in one of the camping chairs you set up in her yard.

You make a face, one for her to laugh at, and she does. "Why would I change the past? I want to change the *future*," you say, and she rolls her eyes, sighing in a way that turns into a laugh.

"You *would*."

You sit up straighter. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

"What, are you thinking about building a time machine?"

"*Please*," she says lightly, "I have the IQ of a radish." Her smile is distant, almost dreamy. "If I was reincarnated, I'd come back as a plastic spoon."

You laugh, picturing it. "I don't think that's how karma works," you say, and she hits you.

"Shut up. Like you'd know."

There's yelling from the kitchen window, muffled but animated, and you stand up, saying that you should probably head out. A bit sadly, she agrees.

She walks you to the back gate, promises to meet up with you next week, and you both say goodnight.

Three years later is the last time you talk. Nine years later, she's dead.

You run the tests on Tuesdays, and make changes on Friday nights.

Over three hundred Tuesdays, and never a full success.

It was a hobby first, an obsession second, and now it's a routine—something that eats away your free time, that fills your thoughts even when you're away from your workshop. No matter where you are it's in the back of your mind, an endless cacophony of what-ifs, swirling numbers and circuit schematics.

After this many years, it feels...normal.

Passage ♦3

Nothing is really different this time. You follow the procedure, marking off each step as you go, watching the lights as the checks run.

One ...green. Two ...green. Three ...

There's a column in your notebook for this, blank boxes waiting for a mark to be put next to them, either a check or an X, depending on the result.

Eighteen lights, eighteen variables that decide if this finally works.

A week ago you were up to sixteen green lights, the highest you've ever gotten, but you know that doesn't mean anything. Every small change you make could hurt more than harm, could make those lights go dim again. It's happened before.

Fourteen ...green. Fifteen ...green. Sixteen ...green.

You put a check mark next to sixteen, satisfied that the new module you added four days ago hasn't damaged your progress. But then—

Seventeen ...green.

You lean closer, surprised. It's good, another step forward, but also... *what if*...

No, there's no way. It can't have been this easy.

You freeze, eyes locked on the last bulb, your notebook forgotten.

Eighteen ...

The final light flips on, and your pencil hits the floor.

"What are you drawing?"

You look up, and realize it's that girl you heard singing to herself last week, the one with curls falling over her ears, her smile a little wide for her face.

"A sword," you say, feeling stupid, tilting your open sketchbook so she can see. Your lines are shaky, the hilt too curved and narrow to look good, but her eyes light up.

"That's awesome!" She looks closer, then points at the next page, careful not to smudge the pencil marks. "Is that a robot?"

Passage ♦4

"Alien." You turn it so she's looking at it right-side up. "It's like, um...like if there was a planet with silicon life. It's kind of an...electronic bug thing." You point at the creature's curved back, jointed thorax, and insectoid legs.

"Cool." To your amazement, it sounds like she means it. A second later, she kicks her foot against the chair, tapping out a sharp rhythm. "Hey, do you like the Bee Gees?"

You blink. "What?"

"You know!" She mimes playing a bass guitar, humming a tune, mouthing the *ah, ah, ah, ahs* of "Stayin' Alive", then waits eagerly for your reaction.

“Oh,” you say, “yeah, sure.”

She steals the pencil right out of your hand and flips your sketchbook to an empty page, writing a line of ten digits at the top—a phone number.

“You should come over to my house,” she says, not looking up. Her handwriting is pointy, but neat. “My mom let me set up her old record player, and she’s got a bunch of Bee Gees albums. We could listen together.”

You’re out of practice at smiling, so it feels strange when you do, but she doesn’t seem to notice. “Yeah,” you say, “okay. That’d be cool.”

When you’re nineteen, her mom gives you her new phone number and tells you to convince her to come back to church, says you should “talk some sense” into her.

Instead, you text her that her mom is still being weird, and ask if she’s okay, if she’s somewhere safe now.

She tells you that she is. She’s gotten a job up north that she loves, something educational where she feels like she can make a difference. That’s significant—for as long as you’ve known her, she’s always wanted to make a difference.

You used to make fun of her for it, but deep down, you believe that she will. That far off in the future, some huge advancement in science, or government policy, or philosophy will have her name behind it; that she’ll leave a permanent mark on society.

Somehow, you know in your soul that her legacy will *mean* something.

You try to tell her that, but the words look wrong, so you erase them. Instead, you talk about your parents, and how things have been, and you chat about old friends and new

opportunities until she has to go.

Passage ♦5

She thanks you when you say goodbye, says she's grateful that you reached out. That she hopes things will get better for you, wherever you end up.

Somehow, she always knows exactly what to say. All you can do is wish her luck.

You're realizing, just like she did, that you can never go back to being who you were before.

Your people might never be proud of you, but you have to fight and change *anyway*, before it kills you.

And it's *tried* to kill you.

Your phone breaks the next time you go on vacation, and you forget to put her number in your new one.

You've always been bad at keeping in touch with people.

They call her the wrong name at her funeral.

Your hands shake with anger and grief as you listen to her family's lies, twisted memories of an imagined version of her that didn't exist.

It's a game of invention, for the sake of their own comfort—they're creating someone they can look back on with fondness, someone whom they could bring themselves to love.

It's fiction, but it seems to give them peace.

They set up tables in the hall for the tangible memories: photo albums, school awards, her little league trophies. People take turns talking about her life, and they show pictures of her on the screens.

Nobody talks about how none of the pictures, stories, or photo albums go past the tenth grade.

“So dedicated to the church,” they say, mournful. “Always went on mission trips. Always did service projects, volunteered, played piano for the choir at Christmas.”

You remember when she snuck out at night so she could drive into the city for a protest, brave when you were too scared to go with her. You remember her homeless at seventeen and still so full of hope, heartbroken at endings, trying to teach herself how to deal with abandonment where there used to be love.

You still don’t know how karma works, but you know a plastic spoon wouldn’t even begin to equal what she was.

Passage ♦6

Her other friends call her by the right name when they stand to speak. They tell stories that are real but that make her family frown, and the pastor cuts them short, taking the microphone back and talking about how only God can heal sorrow and pain, how grieving is a blessing for the faithful.

They seethe with the same anger that you do, and you seek them out after, ask them about her life.

She was in a band, they tell you. She was studying law, had just been offered a job in the government—she was going to make a difference.

But more important than any of that: she was *happy*.

Her mother watches you from the corner, her mouth like a bent knife, slanted and violent.

She's thin and frail now, a fading shadow, and you don't speak to her.

Before you leave, you hug her little brother and tell him that you're sorry. The wall around his feelings is taller than the church.

The radio plays the Bee Gees on your drive home, and you have to pull over, your tears blurring the road.

A week later, half-drunk, you remember that hot summer night, and the tone of her voice when she asked if you would ever change the past.

You scrawl diagrams on stained takeout napkins, and when those run out you find one of your old school notebooks and fill seven pages with notes before you pass out.

When you find them the next day, sober and in pain, something new lights up in you, and you think the first of your what-ifs.

After that, nothing is the same.

You run the tests again, once, twice, three times.

The results are unchanged.

You bend to pick your pencil up off the floor, but you find yourself joining it instead, sinking to lean back against the cold wall, heart pounding.

For twelve minutes you stare up at that last light, solid and unflickering, both a beacon and a warning.

Passage ♦7

There's only one last step after this, and then it's all over.

You stand up, drink the rest of your coffee, and then get to work.

You've done the calculations hundreds of times, but you run them again with shaking hands, just to be sure.

Every detail is included, every factor accounted for, not even the smallest thing left out. The weather, the traffic, construction and demolition, education statistics and school schedules, wildlife sightings, public health records, sunrise and sunset, high and low tide, astrology, the stock market, and on and on.

You know what day and time you have to go to, what actions to take when you get there. It's a plan, clear and laid-out in detail, foolproof from start to finish.

You could do it now, punch the numbers in and set the machine into motion, but...there's somewhere else you need to visit first.

It's cooler than you remember, a breeze playing in the damp grass, and there are more bugs.

You go to brush hair out of your eyes, but there isn't any—you've forgotten what it was like to have it this short, and to feel so small in this too-big chair.

A plastic cup crackles in her hand as she drinks from it and then chucks it in the direction of the house.

"If you could change the past..." she begins, and your chest tightens, watching her mouth trace out the words one-by-one. "...Would you do it?"

You're smiling and she's tugging idly on one of the strings of her hoodie, her hair frizzy from the humidity and her eyeliner smudged at the corners.

She is, in all her deeply-human imperfection, the most beautiful sight in the universe.

This time, you take her question seriously. "I don't know," you say, giving an answer that

would have been true the first time, but that isn't anymore. "I've never thought about it. Would you?"

Passage ♦8

"No." The word is sharp enough to make you look up, to see her face sad and haunted, before she blinks and clears it away.

"Why not?" you ask, shocked.

"It's easy," she says, like she's explaining a math problem to you. "It's just...not worth it."

It's wrong; everything about this is *wrong*. Your chest feels cold, numbness seeping into your lungs, constricting your breath.

"What if it was life and death?"

"Whose life? Whose death?" She tucks a wayward curl behind her ear, and then smiles.

"*Mine?* I'm not worth that." She doesn't mean it in a self-deprecating way; she's serious, her expression honest and open. "Nothing I want is important enough to change things for everyone else."

"What if it doesn't?" you ask, and you feel like you're begging. "What if everything else stays the same?"

"That's never how it works," she says, and you hate it, and you know that she's right.

"It's worth too much," she continues. "People. Life." She takes your hand, squeezes your fingers in hers, and you find a new regret, a new missed opportunity to mourn. "*This*, right now, is worth too much."

Her hand falls away from yours, and she flicks a mosquito away from her knee.

After a moment, deep and aching, you manage to smile.

“I think I’m on your side,” you say. You make a face, one for her to laugh at, and she does.

“Why would I change the past? I want to change the *future*. ”

She doesn’t sigh, and she doesn’t laugh at you or roll her eyes, and you realize the weather wasn’t the only part of your memory that was wrong.

She hums, thoughtful and drawn-out, and then grins at you. “You will.”

You stop running tests on Tuesdays, and the routine fades away. It’s not an obsession, not a hobby—it’s scrap metal locked in the garden shed, with a tarp over it in case the roof leaks.

As a reminder, on top of it, you tape a single plastic spoon.

Passage ♦9

You bury your notes in the bottom of your desk drawer. You don’t destroy them—not *yet*—just in case some part of them comes in handy later, when you’re building something else.

Because you *are* building something else.

Your first project was a failure, you decide. Not a technical failure, but a moral one.

But even as a failure...it did *work*. And if *this* worked, after only six years (and approx. four thousand cups of coffee, more money than you want to think about, and a minor mental breakdown)...what *else* would?

This time, it doesn’t take alcohol to give you the idea.

You write her name at the top of a fresh page and underline it twice before you start on the numbers and the specifics, writing out all of your ideas for the creation that will someday bear her name—her *real* name, the one they didn’t put on her tombstone.

The name that was known to those that loved her.

These are the best gifts that you can give her: a timeline unchanged, and a legacy that has meaning. Something that, if everything goes well, will make a difference.

You no longer want to change the past. It's time to change the *future*.

Second Place: James Reid**Ashburn, VA****The Crypt**

Theodora screamed as Father wrestled her into the crypt. His characteristic tenderness evaporated when the first wave of bombs fell, and now Theodora felt helpless as she struggled against his hold. Her protests, her abject confusion, her sputtering pleas fell on deaf ears. She found herself encased in the coffin designated for someone else. Father bolted her down, and at last his face reverted to that she knew so well. A single tear tumbled from his sunken eyes. He bent down, his lips brushing her forehead.

“Forgive me.”

Unimaginable pain tore through her skull, spreading like wildfire searing her flesh, until her limbs went numb and her vision blinded.

Then, in an instant, she was painless and lucid. Her vision returned all at once. But immediately, as the truth dawned on her, she squeezed her eyes shut. She held her breath, keeping every muscle still. As if somehow, that would undo it all, reverse her fortune. If you could even call it that. She had been prepared to die...

What happened to Amalia?

She forced her eyes open. The stark, immaculate white ceiling stared back at her. The corners contained no dust, no cobwebs. There was no indication that this place had been untouched for years. Her head lolled to her shoulder. The restraints had vanished. She lifted her arms, feeling her wrists where Father had affixed the straps. No bruises, no markings. She

reached up and placed her hand on the impreglass dome that comprised her tomb. At her touch, the dome split apart.

Years ago—even more so now—when Theodora first visited the crypt and saw the coffin, she thought it resembled Snow White’s ephemeral casket. But when Theodora regained consciousness, no Prince Charming awaited her. Nobody awaited her.

She was alone. Alive, but alone.

Carefully, she sat up. Her hair unfurled upon her shoulders, causing her to freeze. Her hair had been pinned up only seconds ago. She felt for her bobby pins and hair clips, but they too had gone. She looked down at her body. Someone—Father?—had replaced her jeans and strawberry red top with a periwinkle jumpsuit. Her hand fluttered to the breast, where a patch bore an insignia of the Project.

A soft breeze rippled over her skin. She detected hints of maple wafting through the air. Her eyes traveled to the vents studding the ceiling’s rim. One of the engineers told her they ensured airflow, dusting, and sanitation. She wondered if they imbued pleasant scents as well. Besides the coffin, the room contained nothing else.

Theodora’s mind continued to push for denial, erecting barricades against the reality that she was actually here, entombed. A nightmare, maybe. Or hallucinations, like the ones caused by the virus that annihilated the Iberians.

Yet, she knew. From the moment Father seized her and marched her through the gaping maw of the crypt’s great archway against the orange nuclear sky, she knew something had gone horribly wrong. This crypt wasn’t meant for her. None of them were.

What happened to Amalia?

“Father?” she called. No answer. She swung her legs over the edge of the coffin. The steel floor felt icy against her bare feet. She stood and crept to the nondescript metal door, the only entrance or exit. She needed to only touch the door for it to open, but she hesitated. Incontrovertible proof of the truth lay beyond, in the Sanctum. If this were a dream, or a hallucination, or even a prank, all would be revealed. Theodora took a shaky breath, steeling herself for what came next. She let her fingers fall against the cool, metal door, and it split apart.

A small gasp escaped her lips. Directly across from her on the opposite wall hung the clock. Its purpose was simple: display how many years had elapsed since the sealing of the crypt. The five red digits shone with the intensity of a thousand burning stars, striking her like meteorites upon the Earth.

10,000.

100 centuries. 1,000 decades. *10,000 years.*

She gripped the doorway for stability, nausea surging for the surface. This wasn’t right. Why had Father locked her in the crypt in Amalia’s place? She wasn’t trained; she wasn’t on the list of Ambassadors. Being the sister of one and the daughter of an Architect did not qualify her for any crypt, much less this one.

Father insisted the 10,000 Year Crypt was the most important, the essence of the Project. Amalia had been diligently chosen as its occupant.

So why the hell was Theodora locked inside of it?

Her eyes swept over the rest of the pristine, dustless antechamber, nearly identical to the coffin chamber. Instead of the coffin, a white marble table stood at the center, a bowl of scarlet crystalline flowers adding the only speck of color. She approached the table and read the engraving in the marble.

WELCOME, AMALIA!

Theodora let out a weak cry. A welcome meant for someone else, someone who she already missed dearly. She recalled Father's intensity, his *determination*...yes, something terrible befell her sister. Next to the engraving was a metal plate, also inscribed with a message from the past. She lifted the relic, buried 10,000 years ago but somehow in perfect condition.

"Good morning, Amalia," she read aloud with a cringe at the Project's attempt at levity. "Welcome to the new world, the final world the Project will touch. A better one, we hope. Remember your training. Remember your duty. We wish you the best of luck. You are the final Ambassador of Humanity. Represent us well. We the fore-bearers of civilizations are counting on you."

She dropped the card. Ambassadors did not need reminding of their duty. They had been raised from a young age in preparation for this life. Theodora watched her sister train alongside the others, learning dozens of languages, agricultural techniques, and the philosophies of governance and the human nature. Everything (allegedly) she'd need when the crypt unsealed.

But Theodora possessed none of that knowledge. Besides elementary French and a pittance of Icelandic, she could only speak her native English. How would that serve her? Had Father considered that when he ambushed her 10,000 years ago?

She let out a sigh. Answers, she knew, lay in the Sanctum. The blueprints of the crypt materialized in her mind: the coffin and its antechamber, the Sanctum and its twelve chambers, and the egress. The egress terrified her the most. She couldn't live in the crypt, as much as she'd like to. The crypt protected the Ambassador from the elements and the outside world, whatever that may be now. But it could not sustain life forever, nor would anyone want to live out their days in crushing isolation. Theodora knew even without humanity courses that humans possessed an innate need for social interaction.

Without even taking a step outside the crypt's protective walls, Theodora could infer several things about the new world. First, she was breathing, which meant oxygen survived in the atmosphere. Second, the crypt was intact, meaning whatever life existed out there didn't have the technological advancements to break the crypt's impenetrable walls and loot its treasures. She could almost chuckle at the thought of thieves ransacking the chambers looking for precious metals or riches, only to find the harmless remnants of a civilization that long since destroyed itself.

Theodora pulled her hair to one side, yearning for something to tie it with. She swallowed her denial, her fears, and her sorrow, and headed for the Sanctum. Through the doors spanned the central hub, shaped like a dodecagon with twelve sides. A control center of sorts was in the middle: two titanic screens hovering above a desk with a standard keyboard, mouse, and a

comfortable chair. The twelve limestone walls more resembled twelve archways affixed with a keystone bearing a symbol unique to the chamber's contents. All except one were open, the doors having slid away when the crypt came to life. Theodora twisted her head to glance up at the arch she just entered through. The outline of a person was carved into the stone, denoting the Ambassador held within.

She ignored the other eleven arches, especially the one on the opposite side from the coffin: the egress. That was the sole door that remained shut. For good reason. She settled into the chair, which didn't seem to fit her. Her hands shook as she booted up the computer.

Instantly, an alert flashed in the corner. Her eyebrows furrowed. Nobody ever trained her on the computer's interface, but she suspected from the icon that the alert didn't signify anything good.

It came from the Architects themselves, probably some recorded welcome or an overly dramatic plea for a success, even though they wouldn't live long enough to see the first crypt open.

"Greetings, Amalia!" the voice of one of the Architects droned. "It is my great honor to welcome you to the future."

Theodora groaned. She reached for the mouse to turn it off, when the screen flickered. Her older sister's face filled the screen. People often said Amalia and Theodora looked alike, as if they could be twins. Amalia had been born only two years prior, and despite being just twenty-two, her umber hair had begun to grey from the stress of the Project. On screen, she cracked a wry half-grin, something she was notable for.

“Hey, Theo. Enough of the Architects’ endless monotony, huh?”

Amalia’s smile fell as Theodora felt tears budding.

“You are undoubtedly confused. And I’m sorry, but I don’t have long. Father is taking you to the crypt now. And you’re putting up quite the fight.”

Amalia chuckled, her face cracked with misery. “This wasn’t meant to happen. It’s my fault. I broke the rules. I fell in love with another Ambassador: Demetrios.”

Theodora closed her eyes, remembering all the times those two were caught together after hours. She suspected there was something between them, but the Project regimented strict platonic relationships. Already, Theodora saw where this path led. Amalia continued, speaking very quickly.

“The first wave of missiles fell, and so they moved me to the crypt. Only...during the routine medical check...they discovered I’m pregnant. Demetrios has no idea, and never will. His crypt is already sealed. But you know as well as I that a pregnancy would put me at risk. I wouldn’t survive the burial. Father is too old to go into the crypt, and all the alternates are overseas, so I insisted that my replacement be you.”

An explosion sounded. Amalia glanced sideways, and heaved a sigh.

“The Architects have always said that the 10,000 Crypt is the final hope for humanity. That is ludicrous. You cannot rebuild the world on your own. Too much was asked of us. What you can do, what you are meant to do, is change the lives of those nearest you for the better. One act of kindness can be the springboard for civilization’s revival. You do not need to know a dozen

languages, or how to farm. You need only be kind to others and be the living manifestation of the best of human nature.”

Another explosion. Amalia winced. She tried to hold back her tears, which Theodora failed to do herself. Amalia stepped closer to the camera.

“Good luck, Theodora. I am so sorry to do this to you, but know that my love for you will outlast this catastrophe. It is with you now.”

The feed ended. Theodora sank into the chair, feeling hollow. Amalia...was dead. So was her child, if it was ever born. Theodora planned to die in the nuclear holocaust along with Father, while Amalia survived in limbo, entombed. The roles had been reversed. Theodora lived while the others died. Nobody from the Project, even the other Ambassadors, were alive now. The 7,500 Crypt, the closest chronologically, would now be a distant memory.

Theodora couldn't stay here. The longer she resided in the Sanctum, the stronger the pull to the egress became. Even though it terrified her, it wouldn't have scared Amalia. She never shied away from her duties. She adamantly believed in the Project, and Theodora's faith in her older sister was unwavering.

Theodora navigated the computer until she found the exterior cameras. The beach on which this crypt was buried had transformed in the centuries since. Theodora found herself overlooking a lush valley brimming with green and purple foliage. Colorful stones checkered the ground surrounding the crypt, replacing the black sand that Theodora dug her heels in as Father dragged her to the coffin. Down in the valley, a small village stood resolute, obstinately defying the theory that humanity would be rendered extinct by the time the 10,000 Crypt opened. The

village buildings, from afar, appeared rudimentary but sturdy, suggesting a permanent settlement.

Theodora smiled. Figures moved about between the buildings, unaware that the monument on their hill had come alive. She would soon join them and learn about a culture no one in her generation fathomed. She channeled her sister's courage, and that of all the Ambassadors who came before her. In the end, she could count herself among them.

She unlocked the egress chamber and headed inside. Here contained all the items an Ambassador may require in their search for civilization. She wouldn't need any of it. The land rover, climbing and scuba equipment, and aerial drone would stay. Amalia was right; she only needed herself.

Of the crypt's twelve chambers, only one mattered. Ten overflowed with the culmination of humanity's achievements, from books and art to forks and aspirin. But all of that could pale in comparison to what existed since. Perhaps the modern humans had no need for aspirin, and had written books and painted portraits which exceeded any known imagination. No, the chamber with the greatest gift to the future was the one Theodora awakened inside of.

She turned to the crypt's great doors, sealed for the last 10,000 years. They sensed her approach and split apart without a touch. Sunlight flooded the chamber for the first time in centuries. Theodora emerged from her crypt into the world reborn.

Third Place: Annika Hudson-Laursen**Chevy Chase, MD****Letters from Home**

The attic was so dusty that Ida's slippers left prints on the floor, as if she was walking through a thin layer of snow. The smell was musty and damp and could only be described as the decomposition of objects of your family's past. It was a room that was best avoided, but at times like these was unavoidable. The house had to be redone, there was no way around it, and according to everyone rational there was no point in doing that unless the attic was part of the deal. The only problem was that it would need to be emptied in order to be demolished (ironic, she thought) and so fifty years worth of family heirlooms would have to be unearthed from the dust and cobwebs and sorted.

Sadly, there was nobody else to do it except Ida herself.

She sighed as she reached the top of the stairs, but not too deeply so as not to inhale more dust than necessary. People had advised her to don a mask but she hadn't bothered. They had offered all kinds of advice like this, however, unsurprisingly none of them had offered to come and actually do any of the work with her. She knew most of the disintegrating boxes contained paper. In the many ages before electronic communication this was all her family's inboxes, all their electronic portals, anything that you would save to your desktop or sync to the Cloud. Well, at least all that hadn't been damaged by damp, insects or rodents. She was not too excited about the task. It was not the ideal way to spend her Christmas vacation days. It also compounded her grief, sitting alone in her childhood home. When she was a child she had often

wished that her parents had given her a sister. It was in times like these in her adult life that she tended to revert back to that wish that again, in much the same self-pitying way she had thought it when she was 11 years old and had no one to play dolls with.

Ida proceeded to carefully remove the top of a dusty gray file box and reluctantly started grabbing papers from inside and placing them on the floor beside her, consistently producing clouds of dirt in the process. As she looked down she saw envelopes marked by foreign (and very old) stamps that she did not recognize at first. Suddenly intrigued, she pushed away the small recycling bin she had brought with her, carefully opened the yellowing envelopes, unfolded the first thin sheet of paper and started reading.

June 18, 1943

Dearest Sister,

I hope this letter finds you well. I hope it finds you at all, as I am unsure whether you have had to move yet again. We are doing our best here although every week it seems our rations have decreased again. I miss fresh milk and thick slices of cheese the most.

Mother rarely gets out of bed, but these days there would be nowhere for her to go so I can be at peace if I fool myself into thinking that she is resting. We are alone on our floor now as the other apartments have been abandoned, although there are rumors that the Jensens were forcibly moved. I cannot comment on that, I did not witness it myself. Hans is growing despite it all. How strange it is that his little body can still develop when the rest of our world is standing still. Perhaps it is because I always give him my share of the food when rations are low.

I thank God every day that he is too young to remember his father was ever here with him. At least he does not have to bear that weight yet.

I wish peace and safety for you and hope to see you again one day.

Love you always,

Henrietta

July 5, 1943

Dear Henrietta,

I am so thankful that your last letter reached me before I changed rooms again. You will see my new address on this letter. It is not too far, but it is deemed much safer. My landlord is kind although the bed is made for a child and the air is heavy and hot. I wish I could see Hans for myself. He must be so playful now and I am sad to think that he is inside all day. I know, however, it is for his safety which is the most important, of course. On the difficult days I wonder whether he will grow up to be a young man and be able to leave all this behind him. How long will it go on and how much will he remember? The painful memories will be worth it if we make it to the other side.

There are whisperings here of weakness in their strategies, but it is hard to believe when you look around. I hope you are keeping to yourself as usual and being sensible when you go out to collect things. I know you are, but I always worry.

You need not worry about me. I am safe and have more food and drink than many others.

We will see each other again.

Love you always,

Inga

August 10, 1943

Inga. I miss you so much it is unbearable. There are days where Hans screams for hours and I cry alongside him with fear. It is difficult enough without my husband, but without you as well I am unsure of how much longer we can go on. Mother has stopped speaking all together and refuses to take food from us. You and I both know how it will go. How will I bury her here? How can we honor her when we cannot even walk freely on the roads, let alone hold a service. You will be nowhere near. I feel so isolated that it hurts. I am so sorry to burden you with this, but there is no one else. We are completely alone. You cannot trust anyone here anymore. Not the shopkeeper or the dentist or the last remaining neighbors. Mother will not even allow me to try to contact a doctor. All I can hope for is that you are still safe and will keep yourself that way in order that one day you can return and I can embrace you once more.

Love you always,

Henrietta

October 9, 1943

My sister. I am so sorry. By the time this reaches you, I assume Mother will have passed on. I am not sure how I know, but I can feel it. There is no way for me to make that better from here. As you must know, sending letters has become a lot more difficult. I curse them.

I am still safe. In a different room as my kind landlord was not so kind after all. I found he had reported all his previous tenants just weeks after they moved in for his own personal reward. I got out in time. This time I am in a basement. It is wet and I feel that I will never be warm again.

I am still here, however. Thankful for that.

Stay strong for me and for Hans.

To freedom,

Love you always,

Inga

December 1, 1943

Dearest Inga,

Mother passed on the 6th of September. It was morning. Seems many years ago now, although it is not. As I feared, she was not buried, we called the city and three soldiers came and took her away. That is all. They would not say where they went.

It is icy cold here and I cannot keep Hans in this room any longer. There is no firewood to be bought and no food to be had. I am praying that your address remains the same as per your last letter because we are coming. I know it is dangerous but you did it and we must try. I feel that staying here in the city will not end well for any of us. We will be careful and as clever as we can

and I will implore Hans to be as quiet as he possibly can. I have seen the train, and made a connection with the driver. He seems like a good man still. We will try. If this letter reaches you, stay there, I beg you. We will find a way to fit us all in that basement, or find somewhere we can be. Anything is better to be together than to be separated, I see now.

Please await our arrival within the next fortnight if all goes well.

We will be together at Christmas. That is my promise to you.

Love you always,

Henrietta.

That was the last letter in the faded folder. Ida reached in the box once more to pull out the small pile of old, faded photographs. They were black and white and the edges were almost disintegrating. The first photograph was a picture of two women holding hands. They were young and glamorous in that old picture kind of way with curly hair and aprons. On the back in almost illegible writing it said "Henrietta and Inga 1938" Another picture was of a young boy, about 10 years old, holding the hand of an older man. The back simply said "Hans".

Ida was only just starting to gather her thoughts and bring herself back to the attic from German-occupied Denmark. On a recent family holiday she had been to a small, yellow, cottage-like church far out in the Danish countryside. Here she had seen her Danish grandmother's grave for the first time. "Henrietta Johansen 1921-1943" was all it said. She also knew who baby Hans was. Her father. She had never been told about the beginning of his life. He, like so many Scandinavians, was a man of very few words. On the 5th of May every year he put a candle in the

window. He told her it was for freedom. Ida felt silly now, realizing she had never asked who's freedom or why.

She had never seen a grave belonging to Inga, in fact she had not known her grandmother had had a sister at all. She wondered whether Henrietta died on her way to be with her sister. She preferred to believe that Henrietta had arrived at Inga's safehouse with Hans. They had embraced and caught up over a warm cup of tea and they lay together in bed for the first time in years. Then perhaps something happened; a loud noise or white light and they both went together. How her father had come out of it she could not imagine. Unless Inga and Hans had both survived, becoming a family and thriving after the war. It was improbable based on the photograph of Hans and the unknown man. Unless Inga was taking the picture? Her mind continued to whirl since her father had never mentioned being raised by an aunt.

She would not get the chance to ask him. He had lived through the Second World War in Europe and a long journey to America. It was *his* attic she now knelt in in the house he had lovingly created for his family. Creating a safety that Henrietta and Inga could only have dreamed of. Ida and her father had taken frequent trips back to his home and she had inherited not only these boxes of letters but also his deep love for Denmark.

Suddenly exhausted by her hour in the attic, Ida climbed down the stairs to try to process. She had so many questions, but she also had one answer. Now she knew where her name came from:

Ida Inga Johansen.

For my Danish family.

Honorable Mention: Mary Kay Smith

South Riding, VA

To Live Forever

I tried to tell him. In fact, I did my best to warn him, and if he goes ahead with his fool of a plan, you cannot say it is my fault.

We met by accident. Well, perhaps that's not even accurate, since we were introduced by a mutual friend who knew something of my quest and something of his restless wanderings. And when my friend asked about my latest efforts, I told her; for why should I not? How was I to know how it might end? Nor could I have foreseen the surge that passed from me to my new acquaintance, my quest becoming his, my turmoil and frenzy driven into his life. I can say for a fact that, had we not met, my part in this would have remained the same. You must understand it is not *that* which concerns me; it is his fate that I fear. I should never have told my tale in front of him.

I went back to Africa the week after we were introduced. The pilot made a short landing on the grass strip after he buzzed the runway to clear the cows, and I was home. No matter that I had lived away longer than I had lived here, Africa was in my blood and surged through my heart. I looked out over the vast veld, dotted with acacia trees and aloes, and was satisfied.

One would think that a person could not feel so at ease in both the lazy veld and the bustling city, but somehow it is true. Perhaps it is as Isak Dinesen said, that both offer anonymity. I would go a step further and say that both offer *possibility*. City lights beckon with the offer of

availability; the veld beckons with the offer of the unknown. Both come with rewards and risks.

But unless you simply count the knowing, I obtained only risks.

It didn't begin with me—how could it? All quests have generations at their back. But I was the first who really took notice. Molly, our African grey, told me. It was as simple as that. She knew and repeated the name of every Sipe in our branch from the last four generations. Not only that, but she used a different voice for each. When she called to one, her voice was stern and commanding, "John! John!" and when she called to another, she pleaded, "Come *on*, Mark—we have to get going!" She said in a gentle, motherly tone, "No, No, Rebecca." Her repertoire included a haughty, "Would you do that in front of the *queen*?" and a wistful, "If we just had a phone!" We all laughed at the family history she had somehow absorbed, and also at her odd, clicking words that we took to be nonsense vocabulary, her own secret language.

Until I worked it out.

You, yourself, know that African grey parrots are believed to have the intellectual capacity of a five-year-old, and I simply thought she had a large vocabulary—that and that she came from a long line of tradition, with all the parrots in our history called "Molly". But when I found the journals, I knew.

Nowhere in the entire collection was there a mention of an African grey parrot dying!

Don't be so hasty! I can imagine you think such a statement is fantastic and are ready to turn me off. Of course, maybe that would be the best thing. He, on the other hand, wanted to know every detail as it unfolded, and now I fear that his interest will take him into danger.

I did my research. I was thorough, I tell you! I read all the way back to Old Henderson Sipe and his account of the elephant hunt with Potgieter and Uys in 1837. This safari had been the stuff of family legends, with the tale of ivory growing with each generation.

The fact is—Sipe didn't get one shot off at an elephant; instead, he came home with an African grey. Molly. And in that journal was a careful documentation of the area where he found her.

I know the account is true. I went there.

At first I centered my exploration around the lake, assuming the magic was in the waters or the silt. It seemed logical. After all, history is full of explorers seeking a "fountain of youth", and I have always been a believer that legends have their basis in fact. So it took me a while to find the tree. Although it looked nothing like the surrounding coral trees with their bright flowers and long pods, it did have large succulent red fruit and blended in. That, and its shorter 20-foot height, made it difficult to spot.

But even after I saw it, I couldn't get to it. Something always got in the way—unseen roots that tripped me up and sent me hobbling away in pain, branches that whipped around in sudden windstorms, flashes of lightning... I tried and tried and tried. I finally felt that I was being withstood.

You can laugh, sure, go ahead! He did the same thing and said I had given up too easily. Well, I'm going to tell you what I told him: the tree *cannot* be reached! Only a bird could get to it. But, like a fool, I told him the location.

I was confused about the properties of this magical tree. I went to the botanical garden in Durban, I went to the library, and I looked at tree sites on the Internet. This tree was simply not there! It was when I turned to the art galleries that I had my first suspicion.

Klimt painted it in gold curlicues. Stanton had Asherah carrying it as an almond tree. Others filled it with family heirlooms and mementos. All fanciful, but seeing the different representations of the same tree made me suspicious, and I went back to the beginning to check.

There it was in Genesis 3.

I thought I must be wrong! How could this possibly have happened? Wouldn't the Tree of Life have been destroyed? Anyway, it is too far south—this was the wrong part of the world! But then again, there is an account of a flood and the waters bursting from the deep...

Was it possible? Could a seedpod have been carried away to a new land, taken root, and eventually have its fruit eaten by Molly?

After I drew my conclusion I was determined to return. I was a witness to a voyage through time, an adventurer who may have solved a mystery of the ages, a discoverer of a priceless secret.

I almost missed it when I went back—the fruit it bore was now long and white. And as I stayed into the following month, it changed again to little green balls! It bore a different fruit every month.

The more I tried to reach the tree, the more dangerous the area became to me. Somehow the tree had its own energy source, and it seemed to be fighting me. Believe me, I tried over and over and over. And now I have been stopped for good.

But later when I told him that, he wouldn't accept it. "*I'm going to find it then!*" he declared.

“Don’t go,” I pleaded. “Look what happened to me!”

“Nothing happened to you as far as I can tell, except that you’ve lost your nerve!” he retorted.

“Don’t you understand at all?” I cried. “The tree has a *guardian*! I have read everything I could about it. It’s not just Western tradition either—even the Chinese say that Chung and Li block the way between Heaven and Earth. No human will ever be able to use this method to live forever.”

I saw his skepticism, and I imagine yours. I can only hope that my final appeal will make him change his mind. For, when I saw I could not persuade him by any other means, I slowly drew off my soft, cotton gloves, wincing at the pain.

“This will show you where I have been the last six months, and what my punishment for persistence was. The last thing I saw before the pain rendered me unconscious was a flaming sword—slashing through the air.”

I saw his horror at the scarred, twisted, burnt flesh of my hands.

I only hope it will be enough.

Honorable Mention: Jane Limprecht

Springfield, VA

Time to Remember

“Hold on a minute so I can drop off these books.” I tugged the glass doorknob of the take-a-book, leave-a-book library in my neighbor’s yard. Anchored atop a metal pole, the wooden box resembled a treehouse painted with whimsical flowers, leaves, and birds.

“So pretty,” Toni said. “Did your neighbor make this?”

“Yeah, Natalie’s creative and handy, too. She lives alone now that her kids are grown—she’s divorced—and she’s a whiz at fixing and building things.” I slid my two paperbacks into an open space on the upper shelf.

Toni craned her neck to look over my shoulder. “What are you giving away? Are you taking any books?”

“I’m leaving a collection of Miss Marple short stories and *The Elements of Style*. I figure Agatha Christie’s never out of date, and I somehow accumulated three copies of Strunk and White.” I winked. “I’m keeping two, to be on the safe side.”

“You are quite the writer, Julia, now that you’re retired,” Toni said, marching in place. She eased the elastic band from her short gray ponytail, smoothed her hair, and tied it up again. “Pick out your book if you’re taking one. I need to get my steps in.”

I tilted my head sideways to survey the titles on the book spines. “*The Tassajara Bread Book*. A college housemate had this in the 1970s.” As I pulled it from the lower shelf, I looked at Toni.

“Before artisan bread was a thing. I think it’s considered a classic.”

“Like you don’t have enough cookbooks.” Toni chuckled.

“I know. And I’m more of a cook than a baker. But I can always bring it back here. Or donate it to the Friends of the Library book sale.” Toni took off down the sidewalk. I tried to slip the book into my drawstring backpack as I jogged to catch up with her. A small envelope fluttered into a clump of late-June daylilies planted near the sidewalk.

“Wait up,” I called. “I dropped something.”

Toni halted in mid-step and turned around. I stooped to pick the envelope out of the flowers.

“It was tucked into the book,” I said.

Toni took three giant strides back toward me, plucked the envelope from my fingers, and flipped it to read the address. “Natalie Anderson. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.” She poked her thumb back down the street. “Is that the library-box Natalie?”

“The last name is different. Maybe it’s her maiden name? She sounds as though she’s from Wisconsin. That ‘o.’”

“That’s where you went to school, so you’d know.”

“And where I met Carl. UW-Madison. Anyway, who sent it?”

“The return address says Walker O’Bern, Madison.”

I reached for the envelope. “I know a Walker O’Bern. He volunteers for the Friends of the Library. It’s not exactly a common name.”

Toni leaned toward me. “I hate to snoop, but....” I gave a quick snort. “All right,” she continued, “I love to snoop.” She waved her fingers in a “go ahead” sign. “What’s in there?”

Lifting the open envelope flap, I felt the slim cards inside. “Two ticket stubs.” I pulled them out and whistled softly. “*The Fantasticks*. University of Wisconsin Memorial Union Theater. Nineteen seventy-six.”

Toni’s eyes widened. “Natalie saved those ticket stubs for, what, forty-five years?”

“Something like that.” I peered into the envelope, then opened it wider to show her. “Look at this. I’m afraid it will crumble if I take it out. A dried flower.”

“A daisy,” Toni said, pulling a sad face. “That’s sweet. No question, she saved all this on purpose.”

Abruptly, Toni looked at me. “Was this guy her husband?”

“She’s been divorced quite a while and I never met her husband, but I’m positive his name wasn’t Walker.” I placed the envelope back inside the book, which I put into my backpack. “It was more forgettable. Bob or Dan.”

“Who is the mysterious Walker O’Bern from the library?” Toni was already six feet ahead of me.

“He’s hardly mysterious. When I volunteer, I shelve the books that patrons put on hold.” She nodded without looking back at me. “Walker volunteers for the Friends of the Library, so he’s in the back room sorting through books that people donate for the twice-a-year sales.”

“An introverted bookworm,” she said, slowing until I drew alongside.

“Could be. But he’s very pleasant. We chat when he comes up front to collect the books he puts on hold for himself.” I puffed out a breath. “He’s widowed, he moved here from Illinois a while back to be closer to his grown daughter. That’s the extent of it.”

Toni and I settled into a comfortable pace. A Carolina wren warbled its *chirpety-chirpety-chirp* from a sheltering oak as we passed by. The morning’s last VRE commuter train rumbled and

clacked from half a mile away, the whistle fading as it left the station behind. The sun warmed my arms and face—just right, not humid. My mind wandered to what I'd fix for dinner.

Toni's mind, on the other hand, must have fixed on Walker and Natalie. She elbowed me when we paused at the cross street. "Natalie is divorced. Walker is widowed. Natalie kept a memento of Walker from the 1970s. How are we going to get them back together?"

My mouth dropped open. "Oh, no. No, you don't."

"Why not?"

"First, we're not certain he's the right Walker O'Bern. Granted, there can't be too many, and UW-Madison was popular with kids from Illinois." I stepped off the curb into the street. "But even if he's the right Walker and she's the right Natalie, we don't know if they went on one date to *The Fantasticks* or lived together for five years and then he left her at the altar. Or she left him."

"If they went on one date, I doubt she'd hang on to the tickets for, like, five decades."

"Maybe she really enjoyed the show."

"Ha, you're funny." A moment passed before Toni grabbed my arm. "Julia, you just solved our problem."

"Our problem? What problem?"

"The problem of how to get Walker and Natalie together. *The Fantasticks* is coming to Wolf Trap this fall." Toni whipped her phone from her back pocket as she charged onward. "But we have to act fast. Tickets sell like hotcakes for the old standards."

"Hold on," I said, palm out. "We are absolutely not going to buy pricey tickets for two of our casual acquaintances." I tapped one finger against my lips. "Besides, it's a big place. If we bought

a lawn ticket for each of them, it's likely they wouldn't even run into one another. Or recognize one another, for that matter."

Toni raised an eyebrow. "You're starting to think my way."

"I am not. This is too corny."

"What's wrong with corny? Love is corny. But it's timeless. You're a writer. Timeless themes are the best." She slowed and clasped her hands to her heart. "Romeo and Juliet."

"Bad example, Toni. It didn't work out."

"Luci and Desi?"

"Elizabeth Bennett and Mr. Darcy."

"Good choice." Toni snapped her fingers. "I have a plan." When I squinted at her, she added, "You are part of it."

"I think I already said no."

Toni stopped walking. "Bear with me. I've seen how you shelve the holds. The cart full of books sits in front of the holds nook and you go back and forth carrying the books to the shelves."

"Well, there's no conveyor belt. And?"

"As you shelve the books, the cart gets emptier and emptier."

"Of course." I couldn't see where she was going.

"As the top shelf of the cart empties out, you could lay the envelope on it. Walker O'Bern sees it when he comes to collect his books." She nodded, once, in triumph.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake. That is a ridiculous idea. For one thing, Walker doesn’t always come up front while I’m volunteering. And on the slight chance that he might, what do I say?” I mimicked a child’s voice. ““Oh look, here’s an envelope with your name on it. Where did that come from?””

“Tell him the truth,” Toni said. “Tell him this envelope fell out of a book you found in a take-a-book, leave-a-book library, by coincidence his name is on the return address, by further coincidence the tickets are for a long-ago performance of an enduring classic that’s still being produced and in fact will be performed here this September. And, by the way, the library box was in the yard of a woman named Natalie.” She gestured toward my backpack. “The name on the envelope.”

I blinked a couple of times.

“Think of it.” Toni’s words sped up as she warmed to her pitch. “These tickets are for a play performed halfway across the country almost fifty years ago. If Walker moved here recently, he probably has no idea Natalie lives nearby. This is fate, Julia. We have a role to play.” She wagged her head. “No pun intended.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier,” I asked, “if I gave the envelope back to Natalie and told her it fell out of a book in her library box, and by the way there’s a Walker O’Bern who volunteers at the public library in our neighborhood?”

Toni twisted her mouth sideways. “Yeah, it would.” She started walking in the direction we’d come from. “Let’s go back and tell her.”

*

The late September breeze rustled in the trees that bordered Wolf Trap’s expansive lawn. Toni and her husband sat on their maroon-and-orange Hokies stadium blanket, next to the worn patchwork quilt Carl and I shared. The four of us had joined the line at five thirty to claim a center space and enjoy a picnic before the performance.

I refilled two clear plastic cups, one for me and one for Toni, with a Virginia white wine Carl and I brought in our dented campout cooler. Toni’s husband opened a couple of beers and handed one to Carl. I admired the setup of the couple to our right—wicker hamper, elaborate charcuterie selection, champagne flutes—but I was perfectly content with our Italian sub sandwiches, chips, and brownies. Especially since the sub sandwich bread was homemade, a successful experiment from *The Tassajara Bread Book*.

Leaning back on my elbows, I inhaled the scent of new-mown grass. As the pit orchestra warmed up, snatches of “Try to Remember” drifted above the clink of glasses and the hum of the audience. Absentmindedly, I patted a waltz-time rhythm on Carl’s arm.

“Maybe we’ll even see Natalie and Walker,” I said with a grin. Then I noticed Toni’s head swiveling right and left as she scanned the audience. “I’m joking, okay?”

“You told me last month you saw him in the library,” Toni said. “He told you that Natalie got in touch with him. He thanked you.”

“True, but that doesn’t mean—”

“There they are,” Toni blurted out. “There they are!” I couldn’t quite reach her hand to swat down her pointing finger. I looked where she pointed.

Off to our right, closer to the stage but with an angled view, Natalie and Walker unfolded a ripple-pattern crocheted afghan onto a grassy rectangle barely wide enough for two people. Holding one another's arms for balance, they sat down, shoulder touching shoulder.

He leaned toward her and swept his hand along her hair. She turned her head and smiled at him, just long enough for me to see the daisy he'd tucked behind her ear.

Toni threw a sidelong glance at me, then beamed and pumped her fist. "Corny, you said? I knew it was meant to be."

"Corny, for sure." I clicked my plastic cup against hers. "And timeless."

The End

Honorable Mention: Ryan Sybertz

Brambleton, VA

The Man Who Destroyed the World

Charles Moreau: The Man Who Destroyed the World. It's one hell of a title to live with. I deserve it though. Had I known the full story earlier, I would've found another way. It would've meant certain death, but at least I wouldn't be living my personal hell. Every day, I walk the streets of this city and see smiles, frowns, love, disinterest, young, old, despair, and hope. Every night I lay awake replaying what happened – how I ended up here and now.

I don't know where to begin. It's easy to say, 'start at the beginning,' but the beginning is technically the end. Even at the end, things were well beyond any semblance of recovery. I think that's the only way I justify it to myself – there was no hope anyway. Deep down though, I know it's a lie.

My actions won't have consequences for decades. When exactly? I'm not sure. The crew and I did a lot of jumping before the mission went off the rails so none of us knew exactly *when* we were to begin with. Just thinking about it now fills me with rage. Maybe if I had been more responsible, none of this would've happened. Everyone would be alive.

I was part of the Walk Team aboard a time traveling research vessel called *The Independence*. The ship orbited high above Earth's atmosphere collecting data on everything that happened down on the surface. Our mission was simply to observe and report. There was to be no interference with life on Earth.

“Walks,” which is how we referred to being beamed to the surface of the planet, were ten-minute samplings of life on Earth. For each point in time to which we jumped, the walk team would beam down to Earth for ten minutes to collect data. After the ten minutes were up, we would automatically transmit back to the ship. To all of us on *The Independence*, this was a straightforward mission that brought the chance of a lifetime – to see how the world does long after we’ve left it. Unfortunately, our attempt to peek behind the curtain constituted nothing more than cosmic hubris, resulting in our – my – doom.

* * *

“Chuck. Come in Chuck,” Captain Matthews’ voice crackled over the speaker in my room. I leaned out of bed and hit the intercom.

“Chuck here.”

“I need your report on the latest walk ASAP. We’re preparing to jump again.”

“On it, sir. I’ll bring it to the bridge straightaway.”

No response. I enjoyed the silence a few moments longer before shuffling over to my desk. The report, entirely handwritten, lay in two, mostly organized piles – data on the left, longhand details on the right. I put the pages together as they should be. Written reports were of the utmost importance for the mission. After each walk, everyone on the Walk Team writes out a report on their assigned location. The reports were then meticulously catalogued. Once *The Independence* arrived back home, the reports would be handed over to mission command, where scientists with more analytical minds could spend time pouring over what we’d seen. Keeping

things handwritten ensured no backup copies could exist. When the scientists were done, the files would be incinerated.

* * *

The bridge of *The Independence* was a spacious control center with floor-to-ceiling windows.

Those windows were always pointed at the object of our research:

Earth.

I handed my report to Matthews and headed over to the Walk Team console. Once the rest of the team had trickled in, Matthews stood in front of the massive windows, where all could see him.

“I have news,” he said, “We’re about to do something we’ve never done.”

When no one said anything, Matthews continued. “We’re going two thousand years into the future.”

The crew was silent. We were already a few hundred years beyond our base time. This was a huge leap.

“It’s a big jump, I know,” Matthews continued, “A jump like this will really advance our research.

We may be able to cut our trip short and head home.”

That got people going. We’d been gone a long time, and all of us were ready to go home.

Matthews observed our reactions and nodded.

“Let’s get ready then.”

When the crew was ready, Matthews turned to the navigator, “Set our course for two thousand years.”

Nothing prepares you for time travel. You barely even notice it happening. The only way you know for sure you’ve jumped is when the pit in your stomach suddenly expands, making you feel as though you need to grab the nearest wastebasket. After a dozen or so jumps, you almost forget it’s there. But when we blinked two thousand years into the future, I came the closest I’ve ever come to needing a toilet.

I felt the heat before I even opened my eyes. Matthews was instantly yelling.

“Lower the shade!”

I opened my eyes just in time to see Earth... What was left of it at least. The blue marble was now a blazing ball of fire.

“What happened?!” someone yelled. No one answered.

“What do we do now?” asked Ricardo, a fellow walker.

Matthews stared in disbelief, sweat gleaming on his forehead. Even with the shade down, the heat was still intense.

“Jump back one hundred years. We’re going back in one-hundred-year increments until we find out what caused this.”

That was the beginning of the unraveling. Humans weren’t supposed to make multiple time jumps in close proximity. What started as a passionate search to avert disaster soon devolved into madness. After the first few jumps, I only had a slight pressure behind the eyes. When Ricardo passed out after the fifth jump, I knew something was wrong. I remember yelling for a

medic, and Matthews walking over. I could have sworn he stumbled. I don't remember much after that.

* * *

I awoke in the medical bay. My mouth was dry. The lights were dim, but they still hurt my eyes. I turned my head left. The movement was slow and creaky, like I hadn't moved in ages. The beds were empty, but the sheets were wrinkled. They had been occupied; how recently, I couldn't tell. I rolled my head right. More of the same.

I pulled my legs out of bed with difficulty. My muscles ached with dehydration. Stumbling forward, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror: I had a beard. Not the two-day stubble I usually shaved away – a full beard. How long had I been asleep? I hobbled towards the door, trying to remember how I ended up here. Ricardo passed out. When he was taken away, Matthews demanded another jump. The Earth was still ablaze.

"It's too much!" a technician cried, "My eyes hurt! Please!"

The protests of the crew fell on deaf ears. Matthews was determined to make it back to before.

"Again!" Matthews demanded. That's the last I remembered.

My balance was coming back. Approaching the door, the motion sensor blinked, but the doors remained closed. I waved a hand to see if it was a glitch. Nothing.

I checked the door control panel. The display showed that the ship was in Low Power mode. Whatever happened, Matthews had burned through at least 85% of the fuel because Low Power was a final 15% failsafe. Jumping back to our home time would be difficult, if at all possible.

As I pulled on the control panel door to access the manual door opening mechanism, the hinges screamed with protest. At the same time, a dull thud sounded on the other side of the medical bay door. I froze.

“Hello?” I croaked. There was a soft scraping, followed by another thud on the door. I didn’t hear anything in the way of a verbal response. I pulled the manual release slowly and the door hissed open slightly. An arm fell through and caught on one of overlapping clasps that didn’t open fully. There was another groan.

As I approached the arm sticking through the partially open door, I noticed that blood dripped from the fingers. My heartbeat quickened. I eased my head close to the opening and glanced down – at the base of the door was a technician. It was Bryan, a navigator.

“Hello?” I said again dumbly. This time, Bryan’s head jerked up and swung wildly, as if he had been caught off-guard. He began to moan in pain and confusion. I grabbed his shoulders to try and still him.

“Hey, you’re alright,” I tried, “Hey—”

But I was cut off by the sight of Bryan’s face. His eyes had been crudely gouged out, leaving cracked and torn eye sockets still weeping blood.

“Oh, my God,” was all I could manage. Bryan writhed free of my grip, and, still shaking uncontrollably, crawled away down the dimly lit hallway.

I was on high alert. There was no way Bryan could have done that to himself. Something was happening on the ship, and I needed to get off. The beam portal was on the bridge. Hopefully

Matthews had found a point in time prior to whatever happened to Earth. If there was no way to jump back to our time, I would have to take my chances on the surface.

I moved slowly towards the bridge. The lights in the hall, while dim, cast ominous shadows that seemed to move with each step. I blinked to cast them away, but they only shifted more. A thought occurred: *they're coming for me.*

It was the longest walk I had ever made. Multiple times, I dove for cover when I thought I heard someone approaching from behind. I would wait for a few moments until the noises receded and start walking again.

When I reached the bridge, I saw that the large windows revealed an intact Earth. Matthews had found it. How far back we had to go was still a mystery.

Behind me, I heard a screech, followed by Bryan's screams. Silence followed. I took a hesitant step back, then another. I was next to the jump console. As I stepped behind the console to hide, the screech sounded again. In my panic, I dropped with a heavy thud.

Captain Matthews sat behind the console already, shaking with fear. His eyes were wide, yet unseeing, as they had also been gouged out. Instantly, my hand flew to my mouth to prevent a scream. When I finally felt some semblance of control, I touched Matthews' shoulder.

"Captain..." I said, "It's me, Chuck."

"Chuck?!" the captain almost yelled, "No! You're dead!"

"Captain, we need to be quiet! It'll find us. What happened?"

"Please kill me quickly. Not like the others."

"Captain, I'm not going to kill you," I scolded, "What happened?"

“It’s all a game now. We’re trapped here. We got a head start though.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Destroy the ship. Before it comes back. Before it finds me. I’m afraid of spiders.”

“Spiders...?” I pondered.

There was a low growl from the entry to the bridge. I looked up over the console to see a humanoid form at least seven feet tall. It sure as hell wasn’t a spider either. It wore torn crewman’s gear and breathed heavily, its hunched back rising with each inhale. I ducked back down and put my hand over Matthews’ mouth to muffle him. When I heard the creature grunt its way back down the hall, I stood.

Matthews must have sent a team down to the surface while I was knocked out. Something must have come back with the team. The only thing I knew for certain was that the ship had to be destroyed.

I tip-toed around to the front of the console. I knew enough about the technical aspects of jumping to plug in a rough time. Once the destination time was set, there would be a ten-second delay while the power was consolidated. That would surely alert whatever was stalking me, but hopefully the jump could stun it for a few moments – at least long enough for me to ramp the time dial back up to *after* the Earth went supernova. And during that final ten second countdown, I would beam off the ship. I had no idea where in time I was heading. My life would most likely be short, but I preferred to die on Earth.

I spun the dials as quickly as I could. When I punched the launch button, I felt the ship begin to hum as it gathered the time travel energy. It sounded weak though. I prayed that I could send the ship forward in time again.

My head swam from the jump. I felt on the verge of passing out. Right before tunnel vision overtook my eyes, I shook my head and remembered what I was doing. Instantly, I was spinning the dials back the other way. I gave it an extra turn for good measure and hit the launch button again. The ship sputtered with effort to gather the last of the energy reserves. The gravitational network on the ship was also beginning to fail.

Through the windows, I could see that the ship was starting to slide towards Earth. The ship would crash after the final jump. Relieved, I ran to the beam station. It was time to leave.

As I ramped up the station, I caught a glimpse of the door in the corner of my eye. The creature was back and looking right at me. I jerked my head up and stared at it as I activated the beam portal. It screamed from its hideous mouth and sprinted straight at me. I closed my eyes and awaited death, but nothing happened. When I opened my eyes, I was still on the bridge – alone. The creature was gone. I looked around but saw no trace of it. Then I was on Earth.

* * *

And now here I sit, just a crazy-eyed old man on a park bench. The space delirium never quite went away. I still see the crew, and more often, the creature. We should have seen the signs: the visions, the pressure behind the eyes (I even found the scars where I tried to scratch out my own), and the blackouts.

Now, it may not seem like it was my fault that Matthews disobeyed the rules of time travel. But even that is not strictly true. I knew that the ship had made it back to the future when it didn't land on top of me. What took me a little longer to figure out was that when we originally jumped into the future, we were looking at the wreckage I caused.

It's only looking back that I realize my choice to crash the ship caused my own demise. The loop ends with me dying of old age before my parents' parents are even born. No one will ever know what happened. They'll only know that we never came back.

Honorable Mention: Zoe Maliszewskyj**Brunswick, MD****Defrost**

Her footsteps echoed loudly as she sprinted down the busy hallway. Deidre pushed her way through crowd, muttering a quick apology here and there. The humansized hamster tunnels that sprawled across the surface of Mars were a true nightmare for foot traffic at rush hour. The heavy industrial UV ray blockers on the windows cast the scene in a light gray with deep shadows.

“Beep!” A food-delivery drone protested as she brushed past it.

“Sorry!”

Diedre skidded on the tile floor as she rounded the corner. There it was. She reached out and knocked rapidly on the Colonist Induction door. She puffed, out of breath. The door swung open.

“Hi! I'm here for-”

“You are late,” the doctor noted, assessing her. He was a tall, older gentleman with a spot of balding. “Five more minutes and your spot would have been given to someone on the waitlist. Come in.”

Diedre sighed and stepped inside. At first glance, it looked like your average med bay: pristine stainless steel exam table, a wash-sink with a fresh fluffy towel, a scanning machine, and a medical assistant. However, the room extended far beyond that, leading to a warehouse filled with occupied cryo-tubes.

A matching cryo-tube sat open upon the table. Her very own. She couldn't help but feel a swell of pride. The selection process had been challenging, with round after round of tests, but she had pulled through. Her spot on the fourth Colonist ship was secured.

The doctor flipped through his clipboard of documents tiredly. No doubt he had been doing this all day.

"Alright, Deidre Collins... ID?"

She handed over her ID card and he flipped it over, inspecting it.

"Okay," He handed it back, continuing over his checklist. "20, no prior cryofreezing history, congenital Arrhythmia-"

"Minor!"

"Ah. *Minor* congenital Arrhythmia. Well, according to previous research, that should not be a concern once you are frozen and in-flight. There has not been a recorded incident as of yet, but if you feel off in any way during the freezing process, let me or my assistant know right away."

Deidre nodded and shot a polite smile to the assistant in the corner.

"Where was I?" He skimmed the page. "Otherwise your health records are clean. No concerns. Now I trust that you have been briefed on the procedure. Do you need a refresher?"

"No."

Diedre shook her head. If only the doctor knew how many agonizingly long lectures Colonist candidates had been forced to attend. Only twenty years of restful sleep and she could escape this over-crowded planet. Rumor had it that Mission Four was set to land on a new planet with a climate not unlike the old home-world, Earth.

“Good. Let's get started,” he gestured towards the cryo-tube.

Deidre stepped up onto the table. She swung her legs up and into the base of the tube, then laid down. The doctor called his assistant over, a kind heavysset woman with identical scrubs save for a small rank indicator. She rolled a cart over with an assortment of needles.

“Alright, just five lil pinches. Hold still, Hon.”

Deidre nodded and closed her eyes. She felt a prick in her arm, followed by the clattering of metal as the assistant swiftly gave her shot after shot. Soon enough she felt light-headed.

Deidre opened her eyes. The room shifted and spun above her as if she was looking through a kaleidoscope. The blurry image of the doctor's gloved hand came into view. The snaps of his fingers felt delayed and muffled. Deidre could faintly register the two talking to each-other in short, affirmative remarks.

A gas mask was lowered over her face. It hissed and spat fog into her lungs.

“Alright- count this with me Ms. Collins. One. Two. Three. Four...”

The world went black.

“...Ten.”

Deidre gasped and her eyes shot open. Before her, the clear glass of the cryotube had frosted over. She shook off disorientation and wiped away the condensation.

Her stomach dropped.

Below her was a sheer cliff.

Deidre recoiled back. The tube rocked in its precarious spot. Her heart pounded in her chest and she prayed it didn't get set off-beat. She rested her head against the back of the tube and tried to get her breathing under control.

There was no time to wonder how she had ended up here. She just had to calm down and assess. After a considerable pause, she built up the confidence to look again.

At her best estimation, her position on the cliff was about fifty feet off the ground. The ground, noticeably, was covered in a thick layer of... snow? She believed that was what the white powder was. It fluttered about in the sky as well.

Presumably, the cryo-tube forced her awake after it lost power. She internally cursed the Colonist Briefers- so much for a “calm, relaxing awakening over the course of ten minutes, guided by a trained advisor.” Looking around, her theory was confirmed.

The lights were dead and none of the internal systems seemed to be working.

She glanced down to her right and noticed a sharp blue crystalline structure that had pierced straight through the reinforced steel. Deidre gulped. Well, if the outside air was toxic, then she would know any minute.

Scanning the inside of her newly-made coffin, she was able to find the release hatch.

“Here goes nothing.”

The capsule hissed open. Deidre remained stock-still for fear of upsetting the tube's delicate position. Cold air whipped through her hair and she shivered. It was beyond freezing outside, and every flake of snow felt like a pin-prick.

Without the roof of the capsule obscuring her view, she was able to see the situation more clearly. The cryo-tube had been skewered on a strange tree-like gem that was sprouting from the cliffside. The top branches seemed to extend up to the top.

She carefully extracted herself from the tube and grasped onto the first branch.

The crystal was smooth and difficult to grasp. As she stepped fully from the tube, the lower branch snapped and sent the cryo-tube tumbling to the ground.

Deidre scrambled up the rest of the tree gracelessly and didn't stop until she reached the ledge. She collapsed in the snow with relief. She closed her eyes and laughed breathlessly.

"Are you okay?"

The sudden voice startled her and she shot straight up, smacking her head into the stranger standing above her. He yelped and stumbled back, clutching his own head in pain. Diedre scanned his appearance quickly. He was a gangly teenager sporting a small collection of scrapes on his face and a large fluffy cape with a hood.

She blinked and realized he was muttering, cursing in frustration... but the language was off. It was Universal Martian for sure, but it was a sharp shortened dialect the likes of which she had never heard.

"I- I'm sorry! I didn't know you were there," Diedre apologized. "But... did you see the ship? Which way it went?"

"Ship?" He groaned.

"Yes, The Mission Four. There must have been an accident or... I don't know where I am. What is this place? It's so cold."

He eyed her suspiciously and explained, "I was hunting when I heard an avalanche and saw you hanging from the cliff. You must have hit your head on the crystal trees..."

"Please! You must have seen the ship," she begged.

He shook his head. "I don't know what you mean, but you are entirely underdressed to be this far out. Here," he shook off his cape and handed it to her. "This should warm you up, Diedre."

"How did you-?"

"It's on your jacket."

"Oh. And you are?"

"Kris."

He turned on his heel and trudged off. Diedre clambered to her feet, swinging the heavy cape over her shoulders. She jogged lightly to catch up with him. The cold still burned against her skin but the cape was surprisingly comfortable.

However, she realized- "Is this fur... breathing?"

"It would be a problem if it wasn't," Kris replied with bemusement.

Diedre had a million questions resting on the tip of her tongue and swallowed them. She followed silently as they travelled through the snow-laden plains. The landscape around them was alien and beautiful. Amethyst mountains framed the marbled blue skies and sparkling gem forests.

The rest of Mission Four was out there somewhere. The wreckage. The fire. The rest of the passengers were stranded in this unknown land. She shook her head to drive away the thoughts. She didn't know any of that for certain.

"Where are we heading?"

"Haven. It shouldn't be far now. I don't make a habit of straying too far."

They approached a cave entrance made of reflective glass and Kris confidently

stepped through, squeezing his way through the misshapen tunnels. Diedre marveled at the kaleidoscopic effects of the lights as they danced across the surface of the walls.

The pair walked through the corridors for a few minutes when they were suddenly met with a burst of steam. Diedre jumped back. Kris chuckled. Diedre flushed in embarrassment and took the lead, walking through the muggy haze.

She extended her hand out in front of her to feel her way. The grey air was so dense she couldn't see past her wrist. At last, the steam dissipated to reveal a bustling city laid inside a massive cavern lit with glowing mushrooms. The chill was gone. That was likely the work of the various steam vents littering the grounds, she surmised.

"This is incredible! Surely someone here must have seen the crash. Do you have Information Kiosks? Comm Tablets?"

Kris frowned.

"I think it's best that we meet with the Council."

"Oh. Right. The Council."

Diedre glanced around, taking in the view of the city. It was strange. It was so different from Mars and yet so familiar. The building material, for one thing, was a sort of carved stone that must have been native to this planet. There wasn't any of the everpresent reinforced metal for which the infrastructure of Mars was known.

"This way," Kris gestured.

In the center of the city stood a domed building covered in ornate statues. A city hall. Diedre struggled to keep her eyes fixed on the road ahead of them. There was so much life all around them. These people were truly lucky.

Kris and Diedre climbed an elaborate spiral staircase up to the intimidating city hall doors looming above them. Kris placed his hand flat against the surface and it rippled a light cobalt.

“Kris Whitlock. State your purpose,” an ethereal voice whispered.

“I encountered a woman in the woods.” He glanced over to Diedre before continuing, “She does not seem to be a citizen of the Haven. She spoke of a ship-”

The doors swung open with a hiss of mist. Kris seemed startled.

“Um, after you, Diedre.”

Diedre felt a pit form in her stomach. There was no way it was always this easy to meet with the leaders of this place, this... Haven. She hesitantly plodded forward. The way was dark, save for some sparsely placed lamps.

The hallway led them to a raised platform surrounded by red silk curtains, each with a silhouetted figure seated behind it.

“Take the pulpit,” an elderly male voice commanded.

The two of them stepped up.

“Not you. Her.”

Kris nodded and retreated back. Diedre gulped. She stepped up into the light.

“My name is Diedre Collins of Mission Four,” she declared.

The room erupted into murmuring amongst the Council.

A man cleared his throat and regained order, “Now, Ms. Collins... I am sure this must all be quite a shock to you...”

“Please- I know you know something! I need to know that everyone else is okay. I

won't impose on you for long. This city you have built here is unbelievable. The people I was traveling with, all of us just want to make place to call home. Our own Haven. So please. Just tell me where the Mission Four is," Diedre pleaded.

She couldn't see their faces through the fabric but she hoped that they could see the determination in her eyes. They had to understand. The room fell silent.

"Ms. Collins, the Mission Four crashed onto the surface of this planet a thousand years ago.."

An icy chill shot down her spine.

"No, that's impossible."

"Let me explain. The Mission Four had progressed on its journey smoothly until it hit an asteroid belt. The crew aboard the ship did their best to avoid a collision, but in so doing, they drastically altered the projected course. The Mission Four drifted in space far, far longer than it ever should have and in the end, a mechanical failure brought it down. It landed here, a frozen world devoid of life."

Diedre's legs shook as she took in the news. So the perfect world...

"Those original people, the crew, they were so strong. They woke the sleeping and together, they found the beating heart of this world deep under its cold exterior. Everything that you see here, they and their descendants, and their descendant's descendants built."

Diedre's mind reeled, "So then..."

"The crash was awful. The Mission Four was scattered through the mountains.

The survivors did their best to find all of the cryo-pods and the sleeping passengers inside. Many are still lost under the snow and ice."

"So I was one of them."

"Yes."

"And what of the other colonies?"

"Communications were lost during the initial incident in the asteroid belt. Mission Four must have been assumed lost by them."

Mars was far away. She knew it would be, but this was different. Mars had forgotten her. Forgotten all of them.

"So," She paused, considering her next words. "Where does that leave me?"

"Fret not. You are not the first lost soul to be found. You will not be the last. It does not happen often, but you will be provided for. Haven will help you get up to speed with all that you have missed. That is the promise of the original crew."

"So I can stay? Here?"

She released a breath she didn't realize she was holding. It wasn't what she had imagined, but something even better.

"Yes. You are a citizen of the Haven."

The curtains rustled as the lead Councilman approached the platform. He had kind eyes set in a well-worn face. He extended a hand out to Diedre and she grasped it back. He shook her hand firmly.

"You will have a bright future here, though it may be a thousand years late."

Diedre smiled. She couldn't wait to get started.

Honorable Mention: David K. Henrickson

Sterling, VA

One for the Road

"Can I have another?" the man asked.

I poured him a drink without comment. This must have been his six or seventh.

"Are you human?" he asked. "Or is that a rude question?" He downed the shot and pushed the glass back in my direction.

I poured him another. After the third one, I had started lacing them with a metabolic agent to counteract the alcohol before it seriously impacted his system. He could drink like this all night without further impairment. "As human as you are."

He gave a snort at that. "What is this place?" he asked, looking around. "A museum?"

It was a light crowd tonight. Couples sat here and there, talking quietly to each other, along with a few solitary drinkers absorbed in their own thoughts. Soft, airy jazz provided a muted backdrop.

Some of my patrons this evening were on the exotic side. From his reaction on walking into the bar, I was pretty sure this guy wasn't from around here.

"In a sense," I admitted. "I'm an antiquarian."

He frowned at the word. "Is that the same thing as a historian?" He tapped the glass, and I poured him another.

“Yes, and no. My interest is in providing experiences of other times and places.” At the moment, the bar was a re-creation of a pre-Diaspora drinking establishment from Old Earth.

“Is there a lot of money in that? I know that's a stupid question. No one works for money these days, right? I've learned that much.”

“Some do, most don't. It's complicated.”

He nodded, not really paying attention.

“So, what brings you here tonight?” I asked. He looked like a man on a mission to forget his troubles. Or talk about them.

“Have you ever heard of the *Flying Dutchman*?”

Through my neural interface, the knowledge was instantly available to me. “Cursed vessel, doomed to sail forever in search of home?” There were several variations to the story.

He nodded.

I poured again and pushed the glass his way.

He took it. Lifted it in salute. “Well, that's me,” he said, then drank.

“How so?” I asked.

“Have you ever heard of the *Romany Lass*?”

“Another legend?”

He laughed. It wasn't a happy sound. "A gateway transport, out of Epsilon Indi, on route to Ross 154."

"The core systems. Must have been a long time ago." Ships like the *Romany Lass* had been used to transport gateways to newly opened star systems. Once they had established the gateway network, there was no longer any need to physically traverse the long light-years between stars.

He nodded. "The *Lass* ran into trouble. A naked singularity. It never stood a chance."

I poured him another. "Tough luck."

He ignored the drink for the moment and gave another unhappy laugh. "You have no idea."

"So, where do you come in?"

"You know those ships didn't have any crew, right?"

I nodded. Back then, getting a ship from one star to another had been tough enough without trying to keep a crew alive for decades on end.

"Well, they still had to be prepared to fix something if it went wrong. I mean, they couldn't just write those ships off. So, they stored a pattern in the gateway buffer the ship's AI could use in case of an emergency."

“You mean a person?” I wasn't as shocked by the idea as some people might have been. But then, I was a history buff.

He grimaced. “Yeah. They chose people at random from the engineering crew who built the ship. Frankly, we didn't think much about it. The idea that something would go wrong, something the AI thought we could actually repair, was pretty unlikely. And we got a nice bonus if we were selected. Some people volunteered. I drew the short straw for the *Romany Lass*.”

Ah. “What happened?”

“You mean when I woke up on the ship?”

“Yeah. What did you do?”

“What could I do? It was a frickin black hole. I got the hell out of there. It was a close thing, too. I barely made it.”

“So how did you end up here?” Our gateway hadn't even existed back then.

“It was that damn black hole. They tell me it probably had to do with the way spacetime gets dragged around near an event horizon. That and extreme time dilation. They say I'm lucky to have ended up anywhere.”

Luck was hardly the word for it, I thought. He must have been stuck above the event horizon for thousands of years before the gateway on the ship had finally locked onto ours. The odds that a gateway, under those conditions, would have been able to make a connection at all were astronomical.

“So, what are you planning to do now?” I didn’t mean to be insensitive—I could see he was hurting—but this was good stuff. And in my profession, I heard a lot of strange stories.

“I don’t know. This isn’t home. But home isn’t there anymore, is it?”

I had to acknowledge he was right. I understood his comment about the Flying Dutchman now.

While subjectively instantaneous, transit times through the gateways were still limited by the speed of light. It could take decades, even centuries, to get where you wanted to go. Such time lags had created isolated pockets of civilization across the settled galaxy. Few people undertook trips across long interstellar distances. Not if they ever planned to return home.

The core systems were almost a thousand light-years away. Which meant that for this guy, home was thousands of years in the past. He could travel forever and never find his way back.

He stood up suddenly, pushing himself away from the bar. “Thanks for listening. I’d ask how much I owe you, but...”

“You could become an antiquarian,” I said off the top of my head.

I didn’t know this guy from Adam. But, what the hell, I was a bartender, wasn’t I? Wasn’t it my job to dispense wisdom, or at least point people in its general direction?

He hesitated, caught between sitting and standing. “You mean run a bar?”

"It doesn't have to be a bar. It could be anything."

"Like what?" he asked, not convinced.

"You're from the past. You tell me. How did people spend their time back then?"

He settled back in his seat. "Mainly working. Or sleeping. Paying bills. Running errands. Getting ready for work the next day. Nothing very exciting."

I would have to agree with him. It sounded pretty tedious. Still... "You could be a dream curator," I suggested.

Now he looked confused. "What's that?"

Pretty much what it sounded like, but he'd been out of circulation for a long time. "Curators arrange dream experiences. Excursions, if you will. You come from a radically different time. You could show them what it was like back then."

Dreaming was a pretty crowded field, but everybody had to sleep. Well, not really. But most people did.

"Is that something people would actually enjoy?" he asked doubtfully. "Life could be pretty grim back then."

And yet he was homesick for it. I didn't point out the irony.

"There's a niche market for practically everything. Case in point," I said, indicating the bar around us. When you lived pretty much forever, novelty had a definite market value.

The excitement that had been growing on his face began to fade. “It wouldn’t be real, though, would it? Just a fantasy, like going to Disneyland. I couldn’t see doing that every day.”

The word rang a faint bell, and I did a quick search through my interface. Strange. And kind of sad. Life had been so limited back then.

I didn’t push it. People in the past had always had a fetish about things being “real”. Besides, he had a point. I imagined it would get pretty old after a while. That’s why I kept changing my establishment around, after all.

“You could be an explorer,” I offered.

“An explorer?” he repeated, perking up a little. I could tell he liked the sound of that.

“New gateways are opening up all the time, and they need someone to go through them to see what’s what.”

Most of it was automated these days, truth be told. Machines did a better job and didn’t mind the time dilation. Humans still had a role to play, though. If only to give their final stamp of approval before a new world was opened up for colonization. Machines had gotten to know people pretty well over the centuries, but we still managed to surprise them occasionally.

And this guy wouldn’t mind the time dilation so much. It wasn’t like he had a home to come back to. Sad, but actually useful in this particular instance.

I laid it out for him, and pretty quickly he wanted to make some notes. I gave him a napkin. I was even able to provide him with a pen. (I’m a stickler for historical detail.)

He started scribbling away, asking questions while I attended to my other customers.

Eventually, he had a stack of napkins in front of him. The drink I'd poured him a while ago was still sitting on the bar, forgotten. He looked a lot better than he had when he'd walked in here earlier this evening.

I did tell him he would need to get a neural interface. I could see he wasn't crazy about the idea of sticking something inside his head, but he simply wouldn't be able to function for very long here without one.

I let him keep the pen to tide him over until then. He'd need to find some paper, though. That stuff didn't grow on trees anymore.

"Anything else I can help you with?" I asked at last, feeling like I'd done my good deed for the day.

He shook his head, looking a little overwhelmed. But hopeful, too. "I don't know how to thank you..."

"No problem," I said. "Let me know how it works out." I was connected to thousands of fellow antiquarians. A recording of tonight's conversation would spread like wildfire. Tons of prestige points for me. Maybe we could do a follow-up at some point.

"Absolutely," he said, getting to his feet. The alcohol seemed to be wearing off. "Not sure when I'll be back this way, though, if this pans out."

I shrugged. "I'll be here." Or not. Time was no longer the enemy it had once been. I didn't tell him that. He'd figure it out eventually.

Maybe he was getting the idea anyway, because he nodded.

I pushed the unfinished drink in his direction. "One for the road?"

Honorable Mention: Debra Snyder

Ashburn, VA

She Who Walks with Spirits

It was the spring of my nineteenth year the first time I performed the Calling.

We settled in the canyon the previous summer and called the place *Kokchi-Shupchi*, for the color and texture of the rocks were like a pile of animal hides. The stone arch was the work of a hand with great strength and perseverance. Though a much mightier river once flowed there, the creek that remained was proud and true to its origins and its path.

We hoped we could be as steadfast, and as lucky.

My father's stories told of a more peaceful time. But my life was always colored by impermanence, by violence. Safety was a luxury that always ended, until we found a new way, a new place to hide from the colonizers. Sometimes it lasted a while - a few months, a year, maybe two.

That night, when Pachu'a shook me awake and drug me from my warm sleeping skins, I knew our safety beneath the animal hide bridge was about to end.

I arrived at the meeting place with a churning dread in my belly.

Keme stood next to Pachu'a. The sweat on his face glistened in the firelight, far too much for the early morning chill. He'd not joined me in my sleeping skins that night as he was on watch atop the ridge, scouting for trouble. I caught his eyes as I took my place in the gathering. He looked down, sagging a bit where he stood.

Pachu'a stepped forward and pulled himself tall, a full head taller than me. Since our father died of disease the previous winter along with many of the other elders, including Neche, the old medicine woman with whom I studied, my older brother had taken his role as Chief perhaps a bit too seriously. Everyone knew of Pachu's quick temper and impetuous nature. I was pleased he still sat quietly for my council sometimes. I felt a responsibility to excel in my medicine skills so he would continue to do so.

"They approach. We have three, maybe four hours at best. It is only thanks to Keme's keen eyes and swift legs that we have even this much warning."

A distressed murmur ran through the gathering.

Pachu'a put up his hand. "They come simply because they wish to take what is ours, and they bring their bloodlust with them. They have poisoned us, burnt us, enslaved us, murdered our weak and elderly, destroyed and defiled our homes. Either we continue to run from this evil, or we stand and fight it."

The fury on my brother's face took on an ominous quality in the firelight. Fighting was never my father's way. His son was quicker to take up his bow and spear.

"Those who can and want to leave, go now. There is no shame in it. But the warriors and I, we will stay and defend the rest, for as long as we draw breath." Pachu'a glanced at Keme, whose eyes were upon him as he spoke. "They put a price on our torn scalps and exterminate us like vermin from our *own* land." He gripped his jawbone club and raised it as he spoke, fingerbone necklace tinkling with the movement. Nods and mutterings of assent rose from the group. "Go,

gather your loved ones, make your preparations. If you must go, make haste. Otherwise, come with me. This day, this place. This is where it ends!”

I took a cleansing breath of the night air and prayed Pachu would heed my council, just one last time. I stepped forward, trembling. “Brother-Chief. There is another way.”

Pachu’a glared at me. I stood as tall as I could and looked him in the eye. “Nanyehi. What is your suggestion?”

“You know what Neche...”

“No. *That* is not an option.”

“She taught me what to do, let me help...”

“I said *NO!*” Pachu’a stepped toward me, his voice shrill.

I knew he only wished to protect me. He considered the Calling too dangerous, the results uncontrollable. It terrified him, as it did me. But to my mind, the alternative was even more terrifying.

Keme touched Pachu’a’s shoulder. “Perhaps... we could do both. Let her try. Lie in wait behind her, ready to fight.” Pachu’a still glared at me, but he hadn’t shrugged off Keme’s hand. “If this is truly the end, my Chief, then let us use *every* weapon we have against them.”

Pachu’a was silent for a long moment. The gathering grew restless.

He finally relaxed and reached for my hand. “My Sister. Walk with spirits this night. May our ancestors guide us along the safe path. Everyone else, flee if you will, or join me in making a plan.” He held my eyes for a moment, squeezed my hand and stalked off.

I closed my eyes. I centered myself around the cooing of the night birds, sorting through a strange mix of relief, dread and urgency.

Neché's warning echoed in my mind: Performing a Calling required a sacrifice of the caller, to be chosen by the ancestors.

"You shouldn't have to do it alone. Let me help you."

I opened my eyes slowly. The meeting place was deserted, except for Keme. He was so close I could feel the heat from his body on my face. "The Calling must be performed alone. You know this." I made fists to stop my hands from shaking at my sides.

He sighed. "*Chiquala*," Keme whispered. His voice was deep and soothing as his namesake, distant thunder. He wrapped his arms around my shoulders.

Keme called me *chiquala*, or 'little one,' since we were children. I was always so much smaller than he, Pachu or any of the other children my age. In later years, it was a nickname he used just for me, when no one else could hear.

I let the sound of his voice fill my heart until it overflowed into my eyes.

"If not again in this life, I will seek for you in the next." He bowed his head and pressed his forehead to mine. Then he was gone, disappearing silently into the trees after Pachu'a.

My torch made misshapen shadows of the clay pots lining the cave walls where the ancestors slept. I withdrew a dish from a pouch at my waist and knelt, my reverence, fear and resolve flowing through me. I gave thanks to those whose ashen remains filled the pots, with the words and motions Neche taught me.

A tingle, a whisper, hovered at the edge of my consciousness.

With trembling fingers, I took a pinch of the dust from several of the pots and placed them in the dish in my palm. Some pots I saw filled during my lifetime, like my father's. Others were filled generations before. I tugged out a tiny container from a cord around my neck, removed the gooey sap inside and mashed it into the ash.

A wave of unpleasant emotions crashed over me from somewhere outside myself - discontent, discomfort, annoyance. I bowed my head, murmuring the familiar prayers. Even so, the irritation filling the space around me quickly grew to fury. I fought the urge to bolt from the cave, to leave defense of my people up to Pachu'a and Keme, to wisely leave the dead to slumber undisturbed.

I took a steadying breath of the stagnant cave air. I removed the paste from the dish and, with a shaking hand, drew the muddy mixture across my face in a broad diagonal, brow to opposite cheek.

I opened my eyes cautiously.

Several pairs of floating embers gleamed back at me from the recesses of the cave. I gasped. My incredulity and fear turned fleetingly to joy as, just for a moment, I scanned the embers for my father's eyes. I did not expect the ancestors to be recognizable as the souls they inhabited in life. But still, I hoped.

I bowed my head again, so low it touched the damp cave floor. The ancestors would now choose to answer my pleas, dismiss them and continue to slumber in their urns or carry my soul back to the beyond to slumber with them. I longed for Keme or any other mortal to be in the

cave with me at that moment. A faint hiss that could almost be mistaken for the whistling wind in winter entered my ears. It rose quickly in pitch to a howl. Pebbles shook loose from the ceiling, bounced off my head. My tears mingled with the ash and sap on my cheeks as I again mumbled the ancient words of reverence Neche taught me.

The howling subsided.

But the embers still burned. And I continued to live.

The ancestors accepted the call.

Just before dawn, their horses clopped into the canyon. The stream of grim-faced men holding guns seemed endless. The horses whinnied and sidestepped, agitated.

I stood alone before the stone bridge.

“Well, well.” The leader pulled to a halt a few strides from me. “Lonely little Indian girl. Guessin’ your people ran off and left you here to show us some good ol’ Native hospitality.” A smattering of grim chuckles went up from the group.

I was silent. A strange wind whispered through my hair and raised the skin on my arms.

“I’m Sheriff ‘round these parts. Like your Chief only more... serious. You know anything about a Mr. Anderson being killed? Right upstanding community member, Mr. Anderson. Ranch owner, a day’s ride east.” When I was silent, he continued. “We know it was your kind that did it. Just tell us where to find the culprits, and we’ll be on our way.” He offered me a malevolent smile.

“My people did not commit this act, Sheriff Dixon,” I said.

Men shifted in their saddles and weapons clicked behind him. "I beg to differ, little girl. An' me and my boys here, we don't like bein' lied to."

"Leave this place now, or you'll be sorry."

He guffawed. "You hear that, boys? Girl's got more balls than some o' you put together, threatening seventy armed men all by her lonesome."

I raised my face and arms to the pale sky. In the gray light of dawn, the red embers began to glow as the ghostly bodies of my immortal warrior ancestors took shape behind me.

Horses spooked and men screamed as the howling began. The Sheriff was the first to fall, his body crumbling to dust as the ghosts moved through him. My people's mortal warriors hidden all around me - in the trees, atop the canyon wall, beyond the rocks - loosed their arrows and spears. Rifles discharged into the trees as the terrified horses clambered and trampled each other to back out of the canyon. The metallic, acrid smell of gunsmoke and blood filled the air.

When it was over, a wave of deep exhaustion flooded through me. I sagged to the ground, cold gravel scraping my knees. The spirits had disappeared, gone back to sleep in their cave. But the colonizers, too, were gone - whether turned to dust, pierced by arrows, or fled.

Pachu'a ran toward me, catching me in his arms. "You did it, Sister," he whispered.

"We did it together," I whispered back. "Where is Keme?"

Pachu'a pulled away from me, eyes closed, face pinched.

A chill colder than the one conjured by the spirits I'd summoned passed through me.

"Where is Keme?"

Now, even all these years later, when the sky darkens and the thunderheads gather over the high desert, I make my way from my people's canyon home to the ridgetop. I huddle there in the shelter of the great, crooked willow tree. I think of Keme's spirit sleeping in his urn in the cave, amongst our beloved ancestors. If I close my eyes, I can feel him at my side, hear his voice in the thunder that shakes the earth. When the wind tugs at my hair, his arms are around me again. And I am free.

Honorable Mention: Kieran Paulsen

Marshall, VA

Sir Arthur and the Dragon

It was eerie how well Art and Evan still knew the arming routine. Art felt like he'd stepped into an alternate reality where the last few years hadn't happened: Kingsley had never tripped in the middle of a joust, Art had never fallen, he'd never been in the ICU, there had never been doctors advising him that he shouldn't ride again, let alone joust. There was just the clink of armor, the honeyed smell of leather polish, and the familiar weight of knighthood on Art's shoulders. Evan's hand lingered on the final buckle. Art could feel Evan's question building in the space between them.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Yes," Art replied even though his hands were clammy in his gloves. Evan sighed, but he helped Art guide his helmet onto his head.

Evan kept a gentle hold of Kingsley's bridle while he led the horse out to the arena. It was twilight. Swallows swooped under the flood lights, taking advantage of the swarms of summer insects. Kingsley's dark ears swiveled to catch the chatter of the small crowd gathered outside of the arena. The show's director, Marina, had scheduled Art to perform last in hopes that the other participants would go home after their auditions. She didn't want to burden Art with extra pressure, but once word got around that this was *the* Art Pendleton, former star of Le Fey Productions and the man once considered to be the best knight in the industry, the audience couldn't be deterred.

The spectators quieted when Art took his place at the start. Alanna and her nimble chestnut mare—the pair that had replaced Art after his accident—stood opposite them. Marina waited at the midpoint of the jousting lane and held a red flag above her head. Kingsley snorted and pawed at the sand. Art grumbled at him to settle.

“On three,” Marina called to the riders. “One, two, three!” She threw the flag down and stepped back to a safe distance. Alanna’s mare leapt into a canter and came charging across the arena. Art couldn’t move. Alanna was halfway down the lane before instinct made Art nudge Kingsley with his heels. Kingsley skittered sideways, head high, tail thrashing, and dragged Art to the far fenceline, away from Alanna’s lance.

“Reset!” Marina commanded.

Art’s breath was loud inside his helmet. His world had narrowed to what he could see through the eye slit. He struggled to wrangle Kingsley back to the start.

Marina counted them down again. Art gripped his lance like a lifeline. Alanna’s mare charged. Art drove Kingsley forward. Kingsley cantered a few steps then balked and threw his head down. Alanna raised her lance to avoid striking Art. She galloped past him accompanied by a chorus of hoofbeats and metal. Art cursed.

Evan was waiting at the start this time. “You don’t have to do this,” he whispered as he stroked Kingsley’s silver neck, brushing the horse’s black mane over his crest so it all lay on the same side. “You’ve got nothing to prove. It’s okay if you’re not ready—”

“I’m fine,” Art snapped. To Marina, he called, “I’m ready!”

Marina raised the flag. “Last round,” she warned. “On three. One, two, three!”

Art urged Kingsley into a canter. It was stiff and choppy. Kingsley's ears were pinned and his mouth was hard against Art's hand. Alanna and her mare moved like fire. Alanna's lance was steady, her position was perfect, and her gaze was focused. She was going to strike. Panic swallowed Art whole. His lance fell to the ground with a heavy thud. Kingsley veered away at the last moment before impact, saving Art, but he didn't stop at the end of the arena. Instead, he cantered out of the open gate and clattered through the stableyard, between the pastures for the retired jousting horses, and into the wooded trails behind the farm.

Art's mind returned to him in the forest. He finally pulled back on the reins, slowing Kingsley to a trot, a walk, and then a halt. Art was dizzy. His heart felt like it was about to explode. He couldn't breathe in the confines of the armor—the steel was a trap, not a sanctuary. He dismounted and stumbled back, reeling until he bumped against an old oak tree with thick roots. He ripped his helmet off and clawed at his armor, tearing the buckles open. The plates fell in disordered pieces. When he was done, Art stared at the pile. The armor reflected back at him, a distorted mirror, a shining emblem of his failure. Art staggered a few feet down the trail and collapsed beside a fallen log. He dropped his head into his hands. This couldn't be happening.

Shadows awakened in the understory, summoned by an enigmatic breeze and cooled by the air over the river. Segments of dark joined together to form a long slithering body, armed with claws and ridged with scales. The head came last, rising nightmarish from the thicket at the edge of the trail. It bore its teeth, inky black and dripping with ichor, and set its ember-red eyes on Art as it slunk forward.

Arthur, the dragon rumbled. What troubles you?

Art flinched when the dragon's voice sounded in his mind, but he was too stunned to run. The dragon tilted its horned head from side to side. A black, forked tongue flickered out from between its fangs to taste the air. Its slit nostrils flared, and then it looked down at Art knowingly.

You were never going to succeed, the dragon said. You thought you could belong here? Be wanted here? You thought that playing at chivalry, honor and bravery could actually make you brave? Could overwrite the things in you that other people run from? The dragon chuckled as it lowered its head and stretched out its undulating neck. Art tried to kick it away but missed.

You were wrong, the dragon continued. I see your heart, Arthur. I see your pain. You know what awaits you. Soon they will all see you were never worthy of their love and they will leave just as everyone has always left you.

Images flashed between the trees; Art's childhood home deep in the Florida swamp, his parents too lost in prayer to love their son; the crisp uniform of the army recruiter who promised him a way out; his best friend throwing a joke over his shoulder, his eyes piercing against his sun-hardened face moments before an explosive threw their vehicle into a ditch with fatal results. Then a dizzying montage of all the desperate things Art had done after coming home. He'd been trying to keep his head above water, but he had only dragged himself deeper and deeper into the dark. Jousting had given him a life worth living. It had given him Evan, given him Kingsley, given him pride and a sense that he could look toward the future with something other than exhaustion. He couldn't go back to what he'd been without it.

The dragon was so close now that it eclipsed the forest. Its skin smelled of silt and rain. It exhaled mist. It held Art in its deep, glittering gaze, then it opened its jaws and lunged to carve out his heart.

Kingsley's hooves came down on the dragon's skull hard enough to shatter bone. The dragon recoiled, hissing and disoriented. It struck out at Kingsley. The warhorse charged, ears pinned, teeth flashing, and drove the dragon into the water where it was swept away, howling into the night. Kingsley shook himself and ambled back to Art. He pushed his head into Art's chest. Art clung to him, inhaling warm horse and sweet grass.

Grief clawed through Art's body. He'd ignored and hardened it over years, shoving it down so fiercely that it had crystallized inside of him. The dragon's venom had startled it to life, and now it left nothing untouched as it pierced and gashed, trying to escape. Art writhed, gasping, and for a moment he feared he would suffocate. An undercurrent of life pulsed from every tree, every stone, every small miracle of a creature hiding under the leaves until the thrum of all it cracked open Art's chest. His grief fell to the forest floor, sank below the moss and disappeared.

There was a long silence. Then, the katydids sounded off, and the barred owls called to each other from distant perches. Fireflies tangled in Kingsley's mane like wayward stars. Art felt flayed. He looked down at himself expecting to see blood, but there was only leaf litter and horse hair. He used Kingsley for support as he stood, mounted, and turned Kingsley back the way they'd come.

Evan appeared midway down the trail. His flashlight beam bobbed ahead of him, heralding his arrival on his golden horse. Art raised his hand to shield his eyes from the light.

“Are you okay?” Evan asked. “What happened? Where’s your armor?” Art shrugged.

Evan, in his enduring kindness, noted the evasion but moved on. “Everyone’s worried. I had a heck of a time talking Alanna down from riding after you right away. I figured you needed some space first.”

Art looked down at his hands. He’d forgotten about his dramatic exit. Worries about what the witnesses must think of him crept to the edge of the trail. Evan adjusted his cowboy hat, gathering himself for a rare moment of confrontation.

“Listen,” he sighed. “I know the last few years haven’t been easy, and I know how much you want to get back to the show, but I can’t stand to see you pushing yourself this hard. You act like the accident was your fault and the only way to make up for it is to get back to the way things were, but that’s just not true. You deserve to live without feeling like you have to chase the past. You need to forget about the show, at least for now, and focus on what you want to be besides a knight.”

Art lifted his gaze. Evan looked stern, but there was worry lurking in his smile lines. Fireflies drifted between them. Kingsley cocked his ear toward the lovers.

“I don’t know what to do,” Art rasped.

Evan’s expression softened. He nudged his horse forward so he could rest his hand on Art’s shoulder. “You see what happens,” he said. “You take it day by day. I’ll help you figure it out; we all will.”

They rode out of the forest together. Art paused at the trailhead to let Evan go ahead. He looked back into the woods, half expecting the dragon's glare to have followed them. He saw the winking lights of the fireflies. He heard the distant yip of coyotes. A warm breeze beckoned him over the fields and toward the small barn apartment now haloed by stars. Kingsley turned his head and nudged Art's boot with his nose. Art smiled, patted Kingsley's neck, and pointed him home.

Honorable Mention: Matthew Annis

Ashburn, VA

It's Like They're Right Here with Us

Suddenly, Sam was alone.

He looked around. He was in a clearing, a secluded glade surrounded by tangled thickets. There was not another human being in sight. He had been running for so long, blindly, his lungs burning and his legs aching, that somehow he had left everything behind.

He stood there for a long time, black flies buzzing around his head, while he waited for his heart to settle and the pain in his lungs to subside.

Then he pushed on into the woods again. As he walked, Sam wondered at the silence. Or near-silence. He could hear the faint rustle of leaves and the chirping of birds: the peaceful sounds of a summer's afternoon. What had happened? Just minutes ago the noise had been deafening, loud enough that his ears rang with it. Now there was nothing.

At last he came to the end of the trees. He stood for a while at the tree line, apprehensive about leaving the shelter of the woods. The land fell away gently before him, meadows and fields stretching away to the horizon. He could see some figures in the distance, though whether they were humans or animals was impossible to tell.

He turned and looked back into the woods, then at the open fields again. Then he cocked his head and listened some more. Nothing. By now the terror Sam had felt when he started running had disappeared, and in its place he felt a different sensation, a creeping, steadily growing unease.

Shaking his head, he stepped forward and began slowly walking down the slope. Even if he had left the rest of his regiment somewhere back behind the hill, there should be others. Where was Cutler's brigade, the New Yorkers that had been somewhere behind them? Where was the enemy, for that matter? He felt a cold sensation up his back, and he could not escape the horrible feeling that at any moment a shot might ring out and he would die here on this hillside.

The grass was almost up to his waist, and it made a swishing sound as he pushed through it. It would harvest time soon enough, and he wondered if the farmer whose grass this was would have enough left to feed his herd. One man walking through a field was one thing; thousands of men was another. Sam's parents' farm in Wisconsin was much like this one. As he thought of it, he was seized again with the homesickness that had hit him over and over in the last few weeks. Perhaps the silence meant that the fighting was over? Maybe the Rebs had surrendered? Maybe it was all over, and he could go right back home to Wisconsin? It was hard to believe, but then so was the idea that a battle could be raging one moment and that in the next it could be replaced by silence and emptiness like the scene before him.

At the end of the meadow, Sam came to a snake-rail fence, one that hadn't yet been broken up for firewood. Looking along it, he could see it disappeared into some more woods, and suddenly he wanted nothing more than to be in the shelter of the trees once more. He walked at first, then broke into a run, irrational fear leaving reason behind. At any moment he expected a shot to ring out, and it was only as he crossed the last few yards of open ground that the horrible thought struck him that the shot could come from the woods in front of him. But as the shade of the trees enveloped him, he saw to his relief that the woods were empty.

Relieved as he was to see no waiting picket of Confederate troops, he would have welcomed the sight of some boys in blue; even his own regiment. He didn't think they'd hold it against him that he'd ran. In the chaos of the enemy attack, it hadn't been only Sam who'd ran. Seemed like the whole regiment skedaddled.

Then Sam saw him.

A little way off, through the trees. A man in Union blue, walking in the other direction. Sam called out to him, but the man kept walking. Sam shook his head. He could barely hear himself after the noise of the battle; the other fellow was probably just as deafened.

Sam set out to catch up to the man. Where there was one soldier, there'd be others, and maybe he could attach himself to whatever unit this man belonged to, tell them he'd gotten separated in the confusion.

As he followed the other soldier, he wondered what formation he belonged to. His uniform looked new, the blue bright and clearly visible through the trees. Sam looked down at his own patched and worn coat, its blue faded by the summer sun to the color of a washed-out sky, the sleeve stained with someone else's blood. He wondered if the other soldier was an officer, neatly tailored, but as he narrowed the distance between them he saw that he had a rifle slung over his shoulder, something no officer did. Must be a newly raised unit with new uniforms then, he thought, and thanked God he didn't have one himself. A coat that vivid would make a wonderful target for Rebel sharpshooters.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something move, and he spun around, slipping his rifle from his shoulder. There was nothing there. Maybe it was just a squirrel, he told himself. He turned

back to follow the other soldier again, quickening his step so he didn't lose sight of him, and ignoring the movement he saw again in the corner of his eye.

The soldier in bright blue was moving quickly now. *Damn*. Sam quickened to a run, leaping over fallen branches and rocks, trying to catch up. Then he skidded to a halt, as bright light flooded his eyes. He must have come to open ground again, and the afternoon sun was straight ahead of him. How had he not seen the edge of the trees as he approached it?

He blinked to clear his vision, and the light was gone. There was only the cool shadow of the woods. Was he going mad? He'd been under the July sun all day, and he'd drained his canteen hours ago. Maybe he was seeing things. Sam swore again as the other soldier disappeared from sight.

He was about to run after him when it happened.

The light blazed in his eyes again, and the trees were gone. The land was open all around, and he saw all of it at once, a thousand things that his mind could scarcely put a name to, and he felt a wave of nausea rush through him. He bent forward to throw up, but all he could do was spit.

When he straightened up, he was still dizzy and a little sick, but this time he remembered. He'd seen all this before. Many times. The smooth black surface of the road that he stood on the edge of - *asphalt* - the fast, shiny vehicles that shot by, faster than any carriage - *cars* - the brick building a few hundred yards away with a giant letter 'M' emblazoned on it - *McDonald's*.

An intense feeling of weariness hit him, and he slumped on to a rock. He'd been here before. Many times. *Many, many times*. And now he remembered all of it. Funny that he should ever

have forgotten, but he knew that if he closed his eyes for even a few minutes that he'd sleep, and when he awoke he'd have forgotten it all once more.

The first time it had happened, it had been harder to tell, but less of a shock once he realized. One moment he had been running, the next moment he blinked and the noise of the battle was gone. Before long he had seen orderlies carrying wounded men from the battlefield; it was only when he called to them and they walked right by him without seeing him that he realized what had happened, what he was.

"Still here then," Sam whispered. "Still dead." He fingered the hole in his faded blue coat. The stain on his sleeve. Not someone else's blood — his own.

Was it every day he did this? Had it been every day for a hundred and fifty years that he had ran down that hill, fleeing the charge of the Fortieth Virginia, and every day that he blinked and realized the world had moved on and he was still here?

Maybe. Maybe not. But he remembered enough of them. The day that he came to a ridge - the one just behind him, in fact - and saw a crowd of people in sombre black gathering, and in the middle of them, a tall rail-thin man in a top hat, President Lincoln himself. It was a funeral of sorts, he had realized, probably the only one he'd ever get, and so he sat down with a crowd of other ghosts in Union blue to listen to their epitaph.

The day that he came to the edge of the town, and saw a clanking, smokespluttering machine trundle by - the ancestor of those *cars* he had just seen hurtle by on the Emmitsburg Road. The day he had heard a throbbing, pulsing noise coming from above him, and looked up to see a shape pass lazily across the sky, like a gliding vulture - *airplane*.

Sam sighed, and got slowly to his feet. He felt better now, as he always did, once the shock had passed. He even began to enjoy himself a little, once he remembered where - *when* - he was. Perhaps later he'd go by the new visitor center - it had been there for years, but he still thought of it as new - and take a look through the museum. He always found that interesting, though he still missed the map with lights they'd had at the old visitor center.

But first, he had to indulge his curiosity. That fellow in blue he'd followed through the woods... was he *one of us*, or *one of them*? Ghost, or living?

He walked over to the door of the McDonald's, and waited for someone to open it. He could pass through the walls of buildings (as long as they hadn't been here in 1863) but he had to close his eyes while he did it, and he'd fallen over a couple of times doing that. Finally, a family came out, and as one of the women held the door open to let her kids through, he slipped by her, squeezing through just as she let go and the door shut. Through the glass he could still hear her. "Dang, they really have the AC blasting right there at the door!"

Inside, he looked around. There were a few men in uniform - faded, torn, and bloody - scattered around the restaurant. With nearly eight thousand dead men on the battlefield - and a dozen or so women - it'd be a bigger surprise if there were *no* ghosts in the McDonald's. He nodded to a couple as he walked through the place. By this time even the Confederates were friendly enough. But it was in the far corner of the restaurant that he found what he was looking for. The man in the bright blue coat. "Of course," Sam smiled to himself. He should have realized. Now that he saw him up close he could see the fellow was built like a steam engine. There couldn't be a single ghost on the battlefield as well-upholstered as that, not even the generals.

The man was sitting at a table with half a dozen other guys in uniform, most in blue but one or two in Confederate gray. Sam tried to remember when he'd last seen a real Reb in an honest-to-goodness gray coat. Most of them wore nondescript brown or butternut-dyed clothes, checked patterned shirts, civilian castoffs, often little more than rags. These fellows - *reenactors*, he remembered - were dressed up like a gaggle of West Point cadets. He caught the eye of a Reb ghost who was lounging against the soft drink machine, and they both rolled their eyes.

Sam turned to go, but paused before turning back to the table. The reenactor had just opened his double cheeseburger, and Sam leaned over his shoulder to breathe in the smell of it. The reenactor shivered, with the burger raised halfway to his mouth, then set it down again. "It's incredible, really," he said, shaking his head, "it's just one those places where you feel such sadness, such a sense of loss."

His friends looked at him, their mouths working on their burgers and fries. "You can just feel their ghosts all around, all those men who died here." They turned and looked around them at the tables filled with tourists in baseball caps and shorts, the sign of the KFC next door visible through the window, the children's play area with its ball pit, and then at each other.

After a moment one of them nodded, slowly, his face deadpan. "Yeah, Jim, it's like they're right here with us."

Honorable Mention: Katherine Diemer**Purcellville, VA****This House is Haunted**

Calling 1958 South Street a home was a stretch. The house was sun-beaten, beige paint peeling from its sides like a scab, slouching on one side of a potholed road with no neighboring houses for miles. The windows were dark, save for wisps of spiderwebs that the previous owner hastily wiped away. Withered grass grew knee-high, crackling in the summer heat. The welcome mat had been stepped on and dirtied so much that only the W remained. The house looked as though it was tired of existing. Lana could understand that. She had been stepped on, beaten down, beaten up, shut up and just plain tired. She wanted to get away from the whole world.

Lana bought the house at a knockdown price. She ignored the realtor's sigh of relief when he handed her the keys and stepped away. She knew that he was glad to be rid of the house, and he was glad to be rid of Lana, with her stony silence and cold stares.

Now Lana was alone. She stared at the hordes of cardboard boxes at her feet.

I should really unpack, she thought to herself.

Instead, she walked around the foyer in a daze. Dust motes floated around her, glowing in the light from the setting sun. Everything smelled like old wood. *This was a nice place, once.* She could see the outline of patterned wallpaper in the living room and worn but well-scrubbed kitchen countertops. Well, mostly scrubbed. Someone had left corn leaves at the end of the counter. Lana frowned and tossed them in the trash. She couldn't think right now; she'd leave

the unpacking for tomorrow. She fished out an aspirin from her jeans pocket and popped it into her mouth, then unraveled her sleeping bag, falling into a deep sleep.

“Where are you?”

A soft, quavering voice echoed from upstairs. Lana woke up to the sound of the stairs creaking - not the infrequent pops and groans of an old house, but steady footsteps, small and light. Lana tried to peer into the darkness.

The kitchen was no longer empty. Dried herbs and iron pots hung from the ceiling, while a fire roared in a fireplace - since when had there been a fireplace in the kitchen? A child, pale and feverish-looking, was clad in a bonnet and nightgown, wandering through the kitchen and looking around.

“Where are you, Dolly? Where is everyone?” the little girl rasped.

Lana felt her heart begin to pound. She stumbled out of her sleeping bag and yelped as she stubbed her toe on the floor. She looked back up to see an empty kitchen, cold and lifeless.

The very next morning, Lana fished the corn leaves out of the trash and immediately felt a sense of peace. That peace evaporated once her phone rang. Lana fled the room and busied herself with unpacking her furniture. A few days later, she glanced through her text messages. Every single one of them came from her sister, Jackie.

“Where are you? Where are you? Where are you?!” Lana

deleted every text.

She didn't see the second spirit until the next month. The sun was beating through her bedroom window. The cicadas buzzed in a hypnotizing drone. Jackie kept calling her, and every time, Lana let the calls go to voicemail. She was too busy trying to repaint the bedroom walls. They reminded her of a hospital - white, barren, miserable. Lana had tried covering everything up with a robin's egg blue, her favorite color. She still felt exhausted and sad.

She drifted in her thoughts until she heard the sink turn on in the adjoining bathroom. Lana sat up with a jerk. The walls were white again, and the warbling sound of a soprano came from the...victrola? Lana stared at the record player in confusion. Once again, she heard the sound of footsteps - these ones heavy and uneven, coming from the far side of the room.

A tall man in longjohns and suspenders stood on the far side of the room, attempting to paint a picture. He held the brush in one trembling hand, then flinched as left a long trail of crimson down the canvas. He let out a roar of frustration and flung the brush onto the floor. *His hand is a prosthetic*, Lana realized. *An old-fashioned wooden one*. Her thoughts were interrupted when the man caught sight of her behind him. He turned around to face her, clutching the picture in fear.

"A ghost?" he whispered.

For the first time in years, Lana laughed. "No, I'm not a ghost. Are you?"

The man faded away into the air. Lana gaped at the place where he had been, then turned back to her room. It was robin's egg blue again.

Autumn brought stormy weather. Slowly, Lana began to notice more odd things about the house. Once, she found the corn leaves formed into a little doll with cornsilk hair, sitting on a kitchen

chair. Lana made some little dresses for it out of the moth-eaten curtains from the living room. After that, Lana would spy the child, now tall and healthy, dancing with her cornsilk doll and singing to it.

Lana also discovered the attic, which was cluttered with old newspapers. Lana took them downstairs, meaning to throw them out, but she ended up reading one instead. *Body of Local Veteran Found Alone In Home*. It was a grim title. There was a picture of the man in the bedroom. She left the paper out on her desk and circled the photograph, writing "*Is this you?*" underneath it. Six days later, written in scarlet oil paint, she read the words, "*Yes. I am always alone.*" The words made Lana's heart hurt. She took out her ballpoint pen and wrote back, "*I am here with you now*".

More messages came from Jackie. "*Is anyone with you? Are you all by yourself?*"

Another sleepless night. The rain rattled on her windows. The strains of swing music wafted through the air from the living. *These have got to be the rudest ghosts yet*, Lana thought. She flickered on the light with a scowl and stomped downstairs.

The entire floor downstairs was lit up with glittering lamps. There wasn't just one ghost, but dozens, milling about in tuxedos and cocktail dresses, clinking together Old Fashioneds and martinis. In the center of it all, a redheaded woman twirled in a beautiful silver gown, showing it to admiring friends as she held a wine glass precariously in one hand.

A maid stepped out of the shadows. "Miss Marina, please be careful with your dress."

The redheaded woman flicked a hand at the maid as though she was shooing away a fly. “You can always make another one, Esther. Go check on the canapes.”

The maid curtsied and slipped through the crowd. The partygoers drew away from her as though she carried the plague. The maid’s face was composed, only flinching at the sound of wine splashing onto Miss Marina’s skirt.

Lana decided to follow the maid.

The kitchen she entered was bustling with cooks and butlers, pouring champagne into glasses and readying an assortment of appetizers. They, too, avoided Esther. They didn’t notice Lana either; in fact, several of them walked right through her.

Esther slipped into a walk-in pantry and took off her cap, wiping a tear from her face.

Lana cleared her throat. “It’s a beautiful dress,” she murmured.

Esther jumped a foot in the air. “My God! A ghost!”

“I’m not a ghost. You’re the ghost,” Lana replied with a sigh.

Esther stuck her hand through Lana’s shoulder and raised an eyebrow at her.

“I’ve heard stories about this house, about a soldier and a little girl who haunt this place.

You, though? I’ve never heard of you. You have a very...lovely outfit.”

Lana glanced down at her oversized t-shirt. “I’m not really dressed for a party, I guess. I wasn’t expecting one. And I’m not haunting anyone. I’m very much alive.”

“Well, so am I,” Esther replied. “Although I’m sure the missus of the house will tear me apart for talking to her daughter like that.”

Memories leapt unbidden to Lana's mind. Bad boyfriends. Bad jobs. Big bills. Big lies, to prove she had her life together. The cracking pressure welling up inside. A panic attack at the wrong time. A hospital stay. More big bills. Everyone who believed in her, let down by her sheer utter failure.

"You didn't do anything wrong!" Lana said, a little too loudly. "You were trying to help her."

"It doesn't matter," Esther replied. "It's not my place to make remarks like that. I'll just have to make another dress, like she said."

Lana stared at the other woman. She noted the hollows under Esther's eyes, the pinpricks dotting her hands. "How long did it take you to make that dress?"

Esther hung her head. "The whole summer. I'll still have to do all the cleaning, and help with the cooking, too."

Lana's breath quickened. "You'll work yourself to death. Can't you get out of here? Isn't there someone who can help?"

Esther pursed her lips. "I could write to my cousin in New York. He'd probably laugh at me, though."

Lana threw up her hands. "Do you want to stay here?"

Esther shook her head. Miss Marina's shrill laugh echoed down the hallway.

"I'd better get back to work," Esther sighed. "I'll try to write to him. I'm not sure it'll help. But thank you for listening to me ramble on."

Lana was about to reply, when the world around began to darken. The last thing she saw before she returned to the present was Esther's smile. It was hopeful.

Christmas came with wind that howled through the chimney. Lana's phone pinged incessantly with texts from Jackie. *"I miss you. You did nothing wrong. Please talk to me."* Lana turned off her phone and threw it in her suitcase, then curled up in an old blanket next to her bare Christmas tree. She was once again surrounded by the old newspapers from the attic, although the headlines were different than what she remembered. *Beloved Painter and Veteran Wills Estate To Grieving Widow. Fashion Designer Esther Harlow Visits Former Hometown.*

"Happy endings all around," Lana muttered to herself. She pulled the blanket over her head.

Lana awoke to the sound of weeping.

Just a few feet away from her was another woman, swaddled in the same blanket. Streaks of gray threaded through her greasy dark hair. Her shoulders heaved with sobs. Lana touched the woman's shoulder.

The woman looked up at Lana. She had Lana's face. There were hollows under her reddened eyes, and deep frown lines. She shivered and mumbled something between sobs.

Lana felt her heart stop. "What happened?" she asked.

"Alone," The Other Lana whispered.

This is my future, Lana realized. *I'm going to rot alone in this house.*

There was a hand on Lana's shoulder. She looked up to see Esther, the soldier and the child, all staring down at her.

"We're all here, honey," Esther said softly.

"I'm doomed, Esther. I'm going to be alone forever..."

“We had all lost hope before we met you. We all thought no one gave a damn about us. But you cared. You made us want to live our lives. Now we’re here for you,” the soldier replied.

“Your sister loves you. She’s frightened about you. Talk to her,” Esther said, pressing the phone into Lana’s hand.

Lana held her head. “I’ve been terrible to her. I haven’t replied to her at all. She must hate me, making her worry so much on Christmas.

“Just one message, Lana. Prove to her that you haven’t turned into a ghost.”

Esther murmured.

“I’m not a ghost,” Lana grumbled. She tapped out a message - *I’m safe*.

Her phone flashed with six excited texts from Jackie.

The Other Lana slowly faded from view, followed by the child, the soldier and Esther, all smiling.

“No, you’re not a ghost. You’re very much alive,” Esther’s voice echoed into the darkness.

Lana sat down to dinner with Jackie for the first time in months. Jackie had not stopped talking since she arrived at Lana’s house, armed with a chicken casserole, several bear hugs and a thousand questions. In the past, Jackie’s extraversion annoyed Lana to no end. Now it felt like a breath of fresh air, after drowning in her own misery.

“Lana, the house looks beautiful. You did a fantastic job renovating it,” Jackie beamed at Lana as she divided up the casserole.

“I didn’t do it all by myself. Some friends helped,” Lana replied with a blush. She wasn’t lying. She had found little cornstalk dolls around the house, decorated with smiling faces in little gowns.

Someone had painted the rooms in her house in a variety of colors - warm roses, soft greens, and of course, robin's egg blue. The lace curtains that now hung from her kitchen windows were sewn by an expert hand. They glowed with a cheerful light as the winter sun set behind the trees outside.

"I'm so glad you have folks looking out for you, Lana. And I'll always be here if you need to talk, all right?" Jackie gave her a playful nudge, but her eyes looked at Lana with concern. *You won't run away again, will you?*

Lana met her gaze with confidence. If this house could come back after years of decay, so could she. The past could give her a future.

Honorable Mention: Susan Reese

Ashburn, VA

Grace Falling

He wasn't surprised when she fell. She often fell. Even on their first date, as he recited a poem to her on the moonlit marble of the Jefferson Memorial, in mid-poem she fell down the steps. What surprised him this time was that she didn't just fall; she disappeared. She also wasn't surprised when she fell. Her name was Grace, but it was sadly ironic, because she was notoriously clumsy. Her parents could not have known that she would be this way, and they were kind and loving, so they would not have purposely been cruel, and probably still did not see the irony in her name. So, no, she was not surprised when, while hiking with her boyfriend, James, she would be tripped up by a hidden tree root, but she was surprised by where she landed. Suddenly she was no longer on the wooded trail with James. She was face down in a mud puddle somewhere, and there seemed to be a classic rock soundtrack playing in the background.

She rolled over and found herself surrounded by a sea of tie-dye and hair. "What happened?" she asked. "Where am I?"

"Whoa!" said a bearded face now peering into her own. "What did you take? They're warning not to take the green one."

"What green one?" she asked. "The only thing I took was a probiotic supplement. And why is everyone dressed like it's 1969? And, why is a Jimi Hendrix tribute band playing?"

"Girl, you're tripping. It is 1969, and that is Jimi Hendrix playing," the bearded guy told her.

"But Jimi Hendrix has been dead for years," Grace said.

“If he’s dead, then how can he be up on that stage playing right now?” someone asked.

“Wait!” Grace said, pulling herself out of the mud puddle, “Are you telling me it really is 1969, and I’m at Woodstock?”

“Dude,” one of the long-haired girls said to the bearded guy, “Somebody better go tell the fuzz to warn people about the ... what did she call it? Pro something supplement. This chick is really tripping.”

“Tripping is what got me here in the first place,” Grace mumbled to herself, still not completely convinced she was in 1969, but if she wasn’t, then this was the most convincing recreation of Woodstock she could imagine. And, man, did Jimi sound good! She wished James could be here with her to hear him. James! Would she be able to get back to him? He must be wondering what happened to her. Or is she unconscious? Maybe she hit her head so hard she is hallucinating. The last thing she remembers is tripping and falling into James who was pushed aside as she fell. But everything seemed so real—the sights, the sounds and the smells. Well, the sights and sounds were awesome, but she could do without the smells of backed-up portable toilets, body odor, and clouds of smoke.

“Did I miss Janis Joplin?” Grace asked. “She’s dead now too and I always wanted to hear her live.”

The group surrounding her exchanged glances, and someone said, “She played at two in the morning, and she was alive then as far as I could tell.”

“Oh yeah, I remember now, Jimi was the last act at Woodstock,” Grace said. “I’ve got to figure out how to get back to my boyfriend and my own time, if I’m really in 1969.”

“When is your own time?” someone asked her, and she could hear the patient indulgence in his voice.

“The twenty-first century,” Grace told them, “and we were hiking in the woods in Virginia.”

“What was that pro-thing supplement you took,” asked a guy covered in even more mud than she was, “and do you have anymore?”

“It’s a probiotic, and it doesn’t make you trip out. It helps with your digestion and intestinal health,” she replied.

“Whoa, dude,” someone said, “Joe could use some of that. He’s been barfing for two days.”

“Well, I don’t have anymore,” Grace said. “I don’t have anything anymore. I just want to get back home to my friends, my family, my boyfriend, and my own century.”

“Well, we are all going home now that the music is done,” a girl told her. “Would you like another shirt? You might have a harder time hitching a ride in that one.”

Grace looked down and realized her shirt was not only covered in mud, but was also practically in shreds, although she didn’t think she looked much worse than the rest of them. But the girl was already pulling a tie-dyed shirt out of her bag. “I washed it in the pond yesterday,” the girl told her, as she also put a necklace of beads around Grace’s neck.

“Thanks,” Grace said. “I’m going to go into that clump of trees to change. “I think I’ve embarrassed myself enough for one day.

“Okay,” the girl replied, “but we’ve all seen so much here, we’re all beyond embarrassment. In case we don’t meet up again, I’ll just say now, peace and love, and watch out for those probiotic things.”

“Peace and love to you, and stay your own groovy selves,” Grace said, trying to channel the sixties.

She stepped into the depth of the trees, and put the sort-of clean shirt on.

And then she fell.

It was a dizzying fall, and at one point she thought she saw James, looking around in bewilderment. Then she found herself in a stark white, brightly lit environment, once again surrounded by strange faces. These were much cleaner than the last ones, and everything around her seemed to be immaculately clean, including the white lab coats worn by the bodies attached to those strange new faces.

“Oh for heaven’s sake!” Grace said with exasperation. “What now?”

“Sorry about that little side trip,” a man said. “It was Josh’s fault.”

Grace followed the man’s disapproving glance and saw a younger man with a sheepish expression.

“You were supposed to come here, not Woodstock. Well, actually James was supposed to come here, but you fell and pushed him out of the way, and then instead of him coming here as planned, you ended up falling into a hole we didn’t know Josh had created.”

“I always wished I could experience Woodstock,” Josh explained, “so I created that hole so I could go one day.”

“Well, you need to work on that some more if you really want to experience Woodstock,” Grace told him, “because I assume you wanted to be there at the beginning and not the end.”

“Yes, yes,” the first man said, “We’re still working on perfecting this time-travel technology.”

“Did you not think that perfecting it would help you get the right person into the right time, and for that matter why were you trying to get James to this time?”

“See, that’s the problem,” one of the women in the group explained. “Our time was running out, and we needed to get James here as soon as possible, so we didn’t really have a choice.”

“So, wait,” Grace said, “am I not back in my own time? When is this?”

“Let’s just say, we’re in a future time from your own,” she told Grace.

“Well, I wouldn’t have believed you if I hadn’t already ended up at Woodstock in 1969, so maybe Josh did you a favor,” Grace said, and was immediately rewarded with a shy smile from Josh, which faded quickly after the man who seemed to be in charge shot him a dagger-filled look.

“Since you’re here instead of James, we will just have to send you back with what we were going to give him,” dagger-eyes said. “You are going to give this to him and tell him what happened in order to save the world.”

“Oh, so no pressure,” Grace mumbled under her breath. Then she asked, “So how exactly are we going to save the world and what are we saving it from?”

“Climate disaster, or basically, yourselves,” he said.

“Hey, the climate change situation was caused by our parents’ and grandparents’ generations, not ours,” she said indignantly. “Our generation has been trying to solve the problem. In fact that’s what James is working on. Wait! Is that why you were trying to get him here?”

“Yes,” the woman said. “James will successfully come up with a way to reverse the damage that’s been done.”

“Wow! I know he’s brilliant, and I knew he would do something great, but this is awesome,” Grace said. “So if he’s going to accomplish this, what’s the problem?”

“Time,” the woman replied. “By the time he finishes his research and arrives at a solution, the clock will be running out on saving Earth. So we came up with our own solution.” She handed Grace a package and told her. “In here is some technology adapted to your time, along with documentation of James’ work. It is what we know from history that he came up with. By the way, he really is brilliant. Anyway, this will help him come to his solutions at least ten years earlier, maybe even more, and those years will make all the difference.”

“And,” Josh spoke up, seeming to regain his nerve, “you will help, because you have the communication skills that will help James disseminate the results of his studies, and you will be able to present them in ways that the population as a whole will understand.”

“So, James and I do have a future together?” Grace said, more to herself than to the group.

“Yes,” the woman said, “but we won’t tell you too much about it, because we are trying not to manipulate the future any more than is absolutely necessary, especially since this is so new to us.”

“So do you feel ready to do this?” the man who seemed to be in charge asked her. “We need to get you back as quickly as possible since, well, we’re not sure how long we can keep this path open.”

“Geez,” said Grace, “Between the Woodstock thing and how you keep telling me you’re still working on this time travel thing, you’re not exactly inspiring me with confidence. So, yes, please get me back as soon as possible.”

And just like that, Grace fell.

She landed back in the woods of Virginia with a thud and said to herself, “Thanks for the warning. And speaking of communications skills, at least the Woodstock hippies said goodbye.” But then James’ face appeared above her, with a look that combined bewilderment, relief, and surprise.

“Grace,” he exclaimed, “are you alright?”

“You won’t believe what happened,” she said. “What a long strange trip it’s been. I have traveled to Woodstock, and then I went to someplace in the future.”

“Well,” James said, “you disappeared suddenly, were gone for less than five seconds, and showed back up with a mud-covered face, wearing a tie-dyed shirt and love beads, carrying an envelope that clearly doesn’t belong in the woods of Virginia, and quoting Grateful Dead lyrics, so time travel doesn’t seem too unbelievable. Unless the most accomplished magician in the history of the world is hiding in these woods, time travel makes about as much sense as anything else. But what exactly happened?”

“I fell for you, James,” Grace told him.

“Oh, Grace,” he said with a smile, “I fell for you on our first date. You are so sweet and smart and beautiful and funny. I knew you were the woman I wanted to marry and have kids with someday.”

“No, no,” Grace said, “I mean I fell instead of ... wait, what? You what?”

“I love you, Grace, and when you disappeared I didn’t know what happened, and it flashed through my mind that if something had taken you away, we might not ever have that future.”

"I love you too, James, but if we are going to get married and raise a family together, there is something we have to do."

"Whatever it is, just tell me," James said. "I'm sure we can do anything if we work together."

"That brings me to the second part of my journey through time," Grace told him.

"The part where you went to the future?" James asked. "What is it we have to do?"

Grace handed him the envelope and said, "We just have to save the world."

Honorable Mention: Heidi Vermette

Round Hill, VA

The Not-Time-Machine

“Dammit!”

“George! Language.”

A long face with curly black hair appeared from behind the panels of something that looked vaguely like a washing machine with a chair attached. “Sorry, dear, didn’t see you,” said George. “Pinched my finger between a couple of sections.” He held out his finger.

“Ouch, that looks painful,” said his wife. “Want me to get a bandage?”

“Nope.” Belatedly, he added, “Thanks, Alice” and picked up a screwdriver.

Alice watched him fiddle with parts. “Will there be a bicycle?” she asked.

“What? No. What are you talking about?”

“Like in the movie. Morlocks and—what were the other species? The pretty-but-vapid ones?”

George’s head appeared again, this time looking distinctly annoyed. “Alice. You don’t need to be here if you’re going to make fun of my project. Where’s Peter, anyway?”

“Safely napping, dear. And why would you think I’m making fun of you?”

“I know it’s incredible, but I think it’s possible, and I get enough kidding around from the guys at Lockheed. And it’s not a time machine, like Wells and company came up with.”

“But isn’t it to travel in time?”

“Only forward. Look, you know what happens when you approach the speed of light, time slows down, right, because you’re always traveling in four dimensions?”

“Yes, dear, I do seem to remember something about that,” replied Alice with just the faintest touch of annoyance in her voice. She’d been one of the only female engineering students in the class of 1956 before George had swept her off her feet (metaphorically; he was only an inch taller than she, and weedy), married her, and set about enlarging their family. She loved her life, loved George’s mixture of curiosity, seriousness, and playfulness, and adored raising little Doreen (now in kindergarten) and now Peter (two, and already counting to twenty), but there had been a time when she had used more physics terms than descriptions of what Dick or Jane was doing with Spot. George was sensitive enough to detect the edge in Alice’s voice but ignored it and went on.

“So an astronaut traveling nearly as fast as light might take four-and-a-quarter years to get to Alpha Centauri, right, while years and years and years pass on earth. And being next to a black hole, the effect gravity has, that’ll slow time down, so that someone next to the event horizon could live his life while just a few minutes pass for someone farther away.”

“The trick being that you either have to be going really fast or about to be crushed by a black hole.”

“Yes. But I think this new drive they’ve rejected, I think it’s got potential to mimic that state—to increase the gravitational field to incredible strength, while rearranging the constituent elements acted upon to avoid being actually compressed, thus slowing down the experience of time.”

“Very exciting, darling. Dinner’s at 6.”

George, who had been about to explain the new insights scientists could gain by accelerating to the future, closed his mouth and resumed tinkering.

“Dam-arn.”

“Need a Band-Aid, Dad?”

“No, I just pinched my finger. Here, Peter, hold this.” Peter walked around the Not-Time-Machine, as his mother had dubbed it, and took a screwdriver from his father. “Where’s your mother, anyway?”

“Her class. Remember? She said she got tired of Jello and Sesame Street, and....”

“Right, right. Now, these new processors are remarkable, I think they’re really going to speed up my progress. Look, son--” and here George launched into a highly technical explanation that Peter, although quite bright for a third-grader, couldn’t follow at all. He could, however, feel highly enthusiastic about his father’s cool project, and listened with genuine enthusiasm to the wash of sesquipedalian terminology larded with equations. After all, nobody else’s dad had an awesome time machine in the garage, even if it didn’t actually travel in time. George, in turn, preferred respectful ignorance to—not exactly mocking, but he felt sometimes that his wife’s admiration for him was too similar to her admiration for their children’s first steps.

“But George,” she’d protested when he brought up the similarity, “Even if you’re right—which I’m not saying you are—a child’s first step IS amazing. Imagine the transformation a child goes through to reach that phase, first struggling on its tummy, then flipping over, sitting up,

perhaps crawling, perhaps scooting—it’s creative and astonishing, even if it does happen with every normal baby.”

This perhaps explained why Alice, returning to college to get a break from the everyday grind of housekeeping and childcare, had nevertheless abandoned physics to take classes in childhood development. George thoroughly approved of giving Alice the chance to expand her horizons, and if he was a bit puzzled by her choice of subject, well, he understood that his own quest could be seen as Quixotic.

“Darn it. This thing just won’t--”

“Dad! Mom says you need to get dressed now. She doesn’t want to be late to her own award dinner.” Peter, now a taller, handsomer version of his father, leaned against the doorway.

George sighed. He’d felt close to a breakthrough, but was always being interrupted—by his family, his boss, some emergency needing to be handled. However, he had the good grace to recognize that Alice’s research on infant motor development was truly something to be celebrated, and he arose, wincing a little as his arthritic knees protested the change in position.

George did not say anything as the movers packed up his Not-Time-Machine, for “temporary storage.” He knew he’d never come back to it; there was no place for it at the senior living facility, and his faculties would only deteriorate as he aged. “Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea, but sad mortality” does something or other, his teacher had made him memorize that. Long ago. Before he met Alice, and he found a fresh pain stabbing his heart at the thought. The waves of grief came less often over the months, though he thought of her every day, and sometimes at night he dreamed that she wasn’t dead—just on a journey somewhere,

and come back to him. “Hello, George,” she’d laugh, and say, “Still working on that device that’s going to slow down time?” And he’d wake up happy, just for a second, his happiness replaced with a new sense of loss.

There were no machines hooked up to George like there had been with Alice. Dying was so much pleasanter these days. Nice young people came and pumped him full of drugs that sent him floating on a sea of semi-consciousness, diving through memories from decades ago...

George knew there was fog by the sea, but not over the hill, not here. It was cool and the poison oak was turning a lovely scarlet, though the day would warm up to a summery temperature. He stood up on his bike, enjoying the air rushing past his cheek and the honk of geese in the park. The golden hills looked closer than usual, the haze thinner. George came to an intersection and waited for the light to turn, then started across.

He saw the car out of the corner of his eye—a white Nova, turning right. Surely he’d make it across he pedaled he pedaled too slow everything was too slow but the car, moving almost sluggishly it seemed but fast enough to overtake him as he watched his feet turning the pedals, George watched the car coming closer and closer and finally clipping him on the ankle.

And then the world blurred, and he was on the ground, his messenger bag spilling papers and keys and aspirins and wallet over the road. A very doleful-looking man was standing over him. “Are you all right?” he said gloomily.

“Mm fine,” George mumbled, shoving things indiscriminately back into his bag. The man helped him, looking distinctly more cheerful although still worried.

George realized he was not fine about two minutes after he'd pedaled off and became aware of the throbbing in his ankle. He made it to the payphone by the drycleaner and called his wife, who picked him up and took him to the walk-in clinic.

"I didn't get the license plate," said George.

"Don't worry, dear, I'm sure you'll be fine," said Alice.

And he was, in a few months, but every now and again in dream and in waking he relived the accident—only he was always faster, outpacing the car that harmlessly performed its right turn and left his ankle unscathed. He did not bicycle to work anymore.

...and suspending him in single moments, light and dark playing behind his eyes, spinning him through galaxies and purple seas and the note A sounding in his ears.

He opened his eyes, knowing that it was now, and saw Doreen and her granddaughter Sophia sitting in the chairs near his bed. Both were texting or looking on blogs or whatever people did on their phones these days. *Now there's a piece of technology more advanced than anything I ever imagined*, he thought wryly. *And people use it to look at cat videos and take selfies. I wonder what they would have done with my machine?* Perhaps one day it would take form, maybe even from his notes and the crazy patchwork contraption sitting in a climate-controlled storage shed. Probably not. George's legacy would be in his children, and the small but important innovations he'd developed at work, and in the oak trees he'd planted beside his driveway. Things he'd dismissed as mundane, some of which he never even thought about. George had moved through time as all humans do—by fits and starts it seemed, although really everything happened everywhere at once.

And that was all. And it was enough.

Honorable Mention: Nicole Bazemore**Vienna, VA****The Starlight Mitra***Monday, July 9, 2142*

Drifting through the shuttle brought back memories for Arjun of when the ship was new, gleaming metal and reflective surfaces. Now it was coated in a layer of dirt and grime, the normal detritus of living, breathing animals: skin cells, sweat, food particles. The Starlight Mitra was showing her age, like a favorite book with the spine broken, the cover falling off and favorite passages underlined.

“You’re a hopeless romantic.” He could picture Jaya telling him. After twenty years back and forth between Ganymede and Guardian station, this would be his last flight. He’d promised her.

He floated into the cockpit, strapped himself in, and used the command center to check the logs. His hand was on the keys, ready to go to the next screen, but he paused and double-checked. Nothing was recorded between midnight and 3 AM. Odd. Probably an error in the system. Unless Sunder erased it? He’d leave a message for Sunder to receive when he woke for the night shift.

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Tuesday July 10, 2142

The blaring alarm clock woke him from a strange dream. Jaya was trapped in the airlock. Arjun tried to open the door. She shouted at him from the other side, but comms were down. He'd tried to read her lips. Something like "I'm here" or "Come here."

Jaya hadn't been on the ship in over ten years. In the beginning it was only the two of them, cocooned in their own bubble coasting through the void. Things had changed once Bala, their son, came along.

At first, he'd been lonely when Jaya stayed home with the new baby. Managing the ship wasn't a problem. Navigation was routine and mostly automated. He could handle the ship's maintenance and repair with drones. But the silence wore him down. Now, with Sunder on the night shift, there were no more middle of the night awakenings for unexpected asteroids or equipment failures. Though they rarely saw each other, they exchanged messages. It was a comfort knowing someone else was there.

After he got dressed, he reached into the jewelry cup that held his wedding ring. His fingers touched the empty bottom. Where could it be? He looked around. Maybe he forgot to secure it last night and it was floating around his room, waiting to become a projectile once the ship started braking maneuvers. He couldn't see it, but that didn't mean anything. He remembered putting it in the cup and screwing the lid on, like he did every night. Now that he looked around, he could see other things were out of place. Someone had been in his room and moved stuff around. And the only person onboard was Sunder. He pictured Sunder walking through his quarters, brushing his teeth with Arjun's toothbrush and trying on his wedding ring. Bile rose in his throat, but the Jaya in his head admonished him, "You're starting to go a little

loopy.” He’d leave Sunder a note to arrange a time for them to both be awake. His head throbbed.

#

Friday July 13, 2142

Arjun walked into the galley to make coffee. He pressed the button, and the machine emitted a strange high-pitched whine. By reflex, he kicked off the machine to push himself away just milliseconds before the front plate of the machine exploded. He pulled himself through the doorway and slammed the button for the door as the pieces ricocheted around the galley.

He pressed his forehead to the cool metal of the wall and caught his breath. He wasn’t sure how much time passed, but adrenaline was replaced with exhaustion and a pounding at the base of his skull. Through the porthole into the galley, he could see the pieces of the machine still pinging around the room. The next time the hot water injection pipe came close to the door, he pressed the button to open the door and quickly grabbed it. As he examined the clogged pipe, he realized the pressure must have caused the explosion. Arjun had reiterated to Sunder time and again how important it was to keep the equipment clean and in good repair. Sunder’s carelessness had almost killed him. He felt pressure beneath his breastbone, like he was going to explode. He needed to wake Sunder now, but Jaya’s voice was in the back of his head was the voice of reason as always. “Calm down, Arjun. Think it through.” She was right of course. They were stuck together for another few days. He’d leave him a note to be more careful.

#

Sunday July 15, 2142

“Dead.”

Arjun saw the message written on the wall, orange against the dull silver metal, as he entered the corridor. He reached out his arms to stop his forward momentum. Was Sunder threatening him? Arjun tried to think of what this could mean, but for once Jaya’s voice in his head was quiet. An image flashed in his mind, a hand gripping the canister of paint. The vise around his head tightened, shooting stilettos of pain through his eyes. He traced the words with his fingers. Overlaid in his vision was an image of another hand, painting the words.

#

Sunday July 15, 2142

Sunder woke in a cold sweat. His dreams plagued with images of his family flash frozen and floating through space. Dreams where his wife was still alive were worse; the tidal wave of loss washing over him again as he awoke. Sunder took a gulp of the feni from the flask in his pocket.

He hadn’t even been there when it happened, just seen the vids. ‘Terrorist attack’ the news reports said. Upset over working conditions or water rights or some such. It didn’t matter.

It was the same in the end. He remembered rewinding the news reel over and again, the subtle inward flex of the metal of the D-corridor of the station, before the huge outward blast. The fire was extinguished by the vacuum, but it didn't matter. Walls and furniture and belongings and people were flung outward, detritus. Most of the bodies were never found. "Missing, presumed dead," was the final outcome. The only closure he could get. Since then, his days were a haze. He sleepwalked through his routines, unable to care. In an instant, his family was gone. Jaya and Bala had been dead for seven days by the time he got the news. He'd lived for seven days, going through his normal routine, while his wife and child were dead in the cold vacuum of space.

He checked his comm and saw another angry voice message from Arjun. He sighed and pressed a button to record a video message.

"Arjun, I know you're confused," he began.

#

Monday July 16, 2142

Arjun woke more tired than when he went to sleep. His headache had built into a full-blown migraine. He gulped painkillers with water from the flask beside his bed. A glance at his comm revealed that Sunder had left him a video message. They always communicated via voice. His shoulders scrunched around his neck and his jaw clenched. He didn't want to open the message, but his finger pushed the button reflexively. Arjun had a moment of confusion when

his reflection appeared on the screen. He didn't remember recording this message, but he was on the screen, speaking words he didn't remember saying.

"Arjun. I know you're confused." His face on the screen said.

He was disconnected from his body, simultaneously recording the video and watching it. Images flashed in his head, his hand holding the comm and speaking into the camera. The rushing sound in his ears drowned out the video. As the man's lips (his lips?) moved, he mouthed the words, knowing what he was going to say without remembering saying them.

"Your wife and kid. Our wife and kid. Jaya and Bala are dead."

Arjun wanted to protest, to scream it wasn't true. But the memories came, unwanted, an explosion ripping apart the side of a space station.

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